

## ***Suggestions for Giving a Research Talk***

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This is a list of points you might want to think about when preparing to give a short conference talk about some aspect of your research. It assumes you're new.

Some people are naturally good at presentations, but most find it a difficult skill to learn, and one which grows with practice – practice and reflection on the process. There are many excellent researchers who give talks, year after year, with some of the same presentation errors! so we can all profit from thinking about it.

I've divided them into three headings. They are concerned with Timing (the length of the talk, and how you and the session chair manage time); Materials (elements you want people to look at or listen to while you're speaking, and how to deliver them); and Presentation of Self (managing the impression you make).

### **Timing**

- Rehearse your talk carefully in full read-throughs, carefully noting the total time. Do it more than once. Timing practice is especially important if you're not presenting in your native language. If you write long and then cut, try to cut it down to 1-2 minutes under the time limit.
- You can mark each minute in the margin of the copy you plan to read, in color, so that you'll know how far off time you are during the talk itself.
- If you prefer to speak spontaneously (not a good idea for most beginners!), you'd better check your watch often, and know where some "mileposts" are: e.g., 5 minutes in may come at 11:50 on your watch. (Have a watch or small clock.) It's surprising how hard it is to do this simple math while speaking in public!
- Find out in advance whether the session chair will give out your handouts, or you need to do it yourself, or whether you can leave them strategically placed in a room for the audience to pick up. The latter saves you the most time; otherwise, the minutes it takes to distribute them may come out of your allotted time.
- Many people like to begin with an unscripted moment, an anecdote or thanks or summary, before the talk. In practice these often expand to several minutes! So be careful, and consider timing them too.
- Even when following a script, in the first moments there's a tendency to ramble, to be expansive, to speak slowly and generally eat up a lot of time. But the start of a talk is rarely what's most valuable for an audience – be careful not to spend more time there than is worthwhile, esp. if it might mean missing the ending.
- Session chairs usually give you time cues. Find out in advance how they do it – do they have flashcards? Is it at 5, 2 and 1 minutes, and then time up? Make sure you can see their signal, and remember to look for it. Most chairs feel happier (and are thus less likely to cut you off!) if you acknowledge the signal in some way, but there's no need to interrupt your flow to utter a sentence about it – a nod is fine.
- Typically you have some time for speaking and some for questions. Chairs may be strict or lenient about running over the former into the latter – find out in advance, and if you expect to be a minute or 2 longer, you might let them know. (If more than that, go back and cut your text!) If the chair is trying to get you to stop and you're pushing ahead, you can rest assured the audience is not paying attention to your words – only to the contest of wills!

## Materials

Conference talks commonly involve the use of paper handouts (anywhere from 1 to 12 pages), overheads or powerpoint slides, recorded sound segments, video clips, and (increasingly) live computer or WWW demonstrations in addition to your speech. It takes practice and skill to manage these easily. A common sight at conferences is a presenter who loses 5 minutes trying to get a video clip to show, or to find their place on tape, or whose overhead is in such small print no-one can read it! Prepare.

- Cue up your tapes precisely in advance. If you have several excerpts from the same source tape, copy each one onto a special conference tape, with a few seconds silence between, to save searching. If you are using computerized sound files, check they work on the very equipment you'll use, on the day of your talk.
- It can be good to have several seconds of taped speech before the part you want people to hear or read, so that hearers' ears can adjust to the ambience of the recording and speaker. If possible, check and adjust the sound quality and volume on the player you're provided with before your talk/session starts. Walk around the room to listen – it's no good if only you and the session chair can hear it!
- Maps can be valuable aids. However, most maps have either too much or too little detail for your purpose– they can be unreadable, or fail to have a crucial boundary visible. Adjust this in advance. Add useful details. Make sure the map's visible up on the projector, or on the right page of your handout, at the moment it is needed.
- Listing things, even exciting data, without analysis or comment is deadly – it gets boring rapidly, and even worse, it suggests a lack of intellectual content.
- Visual quality is essential in using overheads. They are a very low-information-density medium! Use large type sizes; know whether you're speaking in a large hall or a small room; make the type dark enough, and easy to read.
- Before you start (before your session, if possible!), check the OHP to see if it works, and if it has fuzzy edges or weird spots that make your materials hard to see. Look at your slides while you talk to see if they're correct – if the top is off the screen – if they're reversed, etc. Cue viewers with a pen or your finger.
- Reading directly from an overhead is usually a bad idea. Because of their low information density they should have a summary text that you expand on (or the transcript of taped excerpts you're playing, or other visuals etc). People can read faster than you can speak, so reading text aloud from a slide or handout is boring and repetitive – they've already finished it.
- On the other hand, the language or dialect data you know by heart is strange and new and hard for others to decipher; so you must provide a guide (e.g. transcript) to spoken data that is distant from the home languages of much of your audience.
- Similarly, only you can hear every relevant feature and ignore the rest – cue your readers to a few key elements by visual highlighting (fonts, underlines, color). Not too many—they won't be able to read it.
- Finally, be sure to outline your plan at the beginning and summarize your conclusions at the end, not just orally but also on slide or handout. Many brilliant talks which only put data on the handout are completely opaque after the coffee break. Give them a map of the highlights at the start (a few points, in order), and tell them why the journey was worthwhile (1-3 main results) at the end.
- At the start, say briefly what the function of a handout is: “You'll be lost without one”, “For later reference only”, or “Crucial data aren't there”, etc. If there aren't enough to go around (common!), it may calm your listeners so they pay attention.

### Presentation of Self

This is really what it's all about. Sure, you're making a contribution to science, but you're not doing it anonymously – this is crucial to your career. A presentation that is accessible to your audience, well-prepared and timed, and makes best use of materials for listener's comprehension, is both better for linguistics and best for you. You're not there to dazzle, or on the other hand to teach, but to exchange information with your peers – from fellow students to giants of the field – and they will judge you fully on how you do it, as well as on what you do.

- Acting quietly confident promotes confidence – in yourself, and from others. Unless you can do it confidently, do not apologize: for lack of handouts, a late start, working on a familiar topic or a bizarre one, doing a preliminary study or a restudy, etc. Apologies signal that what is coming, or just passed, is not good. (If that's true, your peers will point it out! If not, you have no reason to convey it.)
- Do not vocalize nervousness: “Where was I?...” “Ok here's my slide...” “I'm running behind...” Just don't say such things aloud. It conveys a lack of professionalism that may be lovable in great ones (only!) but will harm your presentation.
- Similarly, reacting too much to the time cue, a restless audience, etc. can just make distractions worse and cause you to lose yourself.
- Making eye contact can be a good thing. You don't have to locate individuals (though some people find that helpful), but do look up regularly, glance at different parts of the room, and so on. It actually helps people understand you, and thus appreciate what's good in your talk. It also makes you appear to be at ease; this makes them think you know what you're doing, and must be saying something worthwhile. It also helps you see the time signals!
- Eye contact is part of relating to your audience informally– esp. crucial if you read from a prepared text. Brief (relevant) references to what others have said at the conference shows you're part of the community and have been paying attention.
- Vernacularizing a written text is essential if you read from one. (I usually do.) The common wisdom is, “Don't read. Know your material and just get up there and talk about it.” For beginners, I find this bad advice (esp. non-native speakers). It can be much better to plan everything – but plan for it to flow, be lifelike, and sound like speech rather than text. Are there sign interpreters? Plan for them! Give them a handout in advance, speak slowly enough, and be appropriately oral.
- Use short sentences. Make sure the sentence order is the natural order of thinking. Give definitions or explain technical bits when it makes sense to hear them (not after 5 uses of a term).
- Think about where you'll pause – for emphasis, for breath – and build it into your sentences. When rehearsing, use a colored marker to put in important stresses or pauses. Leave time for listeners to assimilate the densest materials – to listen to your tapes – to read your table. If they can't follow it, you're wasting everyone's time – just finishing the talk is not your goal! Go fast in the easiest parts.
- The very act of fielding questions at a conference is stressful. Receiving a good question is humbling – you may not know the answer. Defend your ground calmly if you are attacked, but do not take each question as an attack. Have extra data handy for questions you can anticipate (drop clues in your talk so these get asked!)
- Accept that you won't be able to tell during the talk whether it is a fine one, awful or excellent. Your tendency may be to think it's going wrong – but thinking that can cause it to go wrong! Just defer your judgment till afterwards and don't worry.
- Prepare a good 30-second finish – a definite, positive & clear summary statement– and be sure you conclude with it, no matter what time pressure you're under.