

How to Make Academic Presentations – Short Version

Berthold Herrendorf*
(Arizona State University)

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*I prepared the first version of these slides in 2015/6 as an introduction to a seminar in which advanced PhD students presented their work. I have since updated them taking into account comments and suggestions from Georg Duernecker, Edward Prescott, B. Ravikumar, and Gustavo Ventura.

Motivation

Why are presentation skills important?

- **People communicate mostly through presentations**
 - Reading is too time consuming for busy people.
 - Interaction helps busy people understand new material.

Why do I teach this class?

- My experience is that everyone can become an adequate presenter.
- My goal is to introduce you to some essential skills and basic techniques.
- My most important recommendation is basic:

PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

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- **Routinize as much as possible**
 - In the spirit of Yogi Berra:
“90% of a presentation is routine and the other half is mental”.
- **Tape yourself**
 - Watching yourself makes you aware of all the goofy things you do.
 - That’s painful and your voice will sound weird to you, but that’s also educational.
- **Give practice presentations**
 - Experience how your presentation feels when you speak out in front of others.
 - Get feedback from colleagues and friends, wait for a few days and critically reevaluate.

Roadmap

1. Designing Slides
2. Developing Arguments
3. Helping Yourself
4. Final Remarks

1. Designing Slides

Set achievable goals for your presentation

- **Don't overestimate your audience**
 - People cannot digest a lot of new material in one sitting (“this slide is so smart, the client won't understand it”).
 - It is almost impossible to make a presentation too simple.

Restrict the number of slides and the material on each slide

- **Put only the bare essentials on the main slides**
- **Use landscape and large font**
- **Convey one message per slide**
 - Summarize the message in the headline.
 - Use at most ten bullet points to deliver the message.
 - Restrict each bullet point to one line.

Plan to say everything that is on the slides

Plan to say more than is on the slides

- I need 2–3 minutes to deliver one slide.
- I first say what is on it, then I explain and rephrase it, then I go beyond it.

Make figures, graphs, and tables accessible

- **Design each figure to convey one message summarized in the title**
 - Label the axes and the curves clearly.
 - Use large font (typically much larger than in the paper).
 - Plot at most 3 time series on each figure.
- **Keep tables simple**
 - Put only the numbers that you plan to talk about.
 - If you need many more than 10 numbers, consider turning the table into a figure.

2. Developing Arguments

Develop your arguments in newspaper style, not in joke/novel style

- **Journalists first state the main point, then explain the main steps, then the details**
 - The editor can cut the article from the end so as to fit it into the available space.
 - The reader can get the main idea without fully reading the article.
- **Use the advantages of newspaper style for your presentations**
 - Ensures the audience knows where you are going.
 - Allows you to leave out less important material when time pressure builds.

Structure your presentation clearly

- Introduction/Motivation
- Main part to develop argument
- Conclusion/Take–away message

Don't confuse people with elegant variation

- **Use the same concepts throughout the talk**
 - If you introduce the household, then it's the household.
 - Save people the effort it takes to realize that synonyms (agent etc) mean the same.
- **Use established conventions and concepts**

Use active verbs and parallel structures

- **OK**
 - Using active verbs makes presentations lively.
 - Presentations are easier to follow if parallel structures are used.
- **Better**
 - Use active verbs to make presentations lively.
 - Use parallel structures to make presentations easier to follow.

3. Helping Yourself

Set achievable goals for yourself

- **Everyone can become an adequate presenter**
 - Aim for satisfactory plus, not stellar.
 - Aim for marginal improvements in each presentation.
- **Find the style that suits you instead of mechanically copying others.**

Understand the biology behind the reactions of your body

- **Your body interprets a big talk as an existential crisis and gets ready to fight**
 - releases adrenaline
 - stops higher reasoning
 - goes on autopilot.
- **Some adrenalin is necessary to help you perform**
 - “If I am not a little nervous before a talk, then I goof up”.
- **Too much adrenalin prevents you from delivering except in fights.**

Learn how to manage the reactions of your body

- **Manage your adrenalin through deep breathing, meditation, physical exercise, yoga.**
- **Put a lower limit on how bad things can turn out**
 - “Nothing is very important, and most things are not important at all”.
- **Routinize as much as possible**
 - You will make mistakes when you improvise, particularly under pressure (that’s why the training of airplane pilots aims to minimize improvisation).
 - Think ahead and address expected problems.
 - PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.

Use body language to your advantage

- **Choose a stable stand and an open posture**
 - Keep your feet slightly apart.
 - Hold your hands openly in front of your body (instead of in your pockets).
 - Use gestures to release excess energy.
- **Establish eye contact with the audience**
 - Work all parts of the room.
 - Focus on people who smile and send approving signals.

4. Final Remarks

Remember to set achievable goals for yourself

- Aim for satisfactory plus instead of stellar.
- Find the style that suits you instead of mechanically copying others.

... and remember that the key to a successful presentation is to

PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE