How to Make Academic Presentations – Short Version

Berthold Herrendorf*
(Arizona State University)

February 7, 2020

*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

Busy people often prefer communicating through presentations

- Reading is too time consuming.
- Asking questions/interacting helps to 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 essential skills and basic techniques.
- My most important recommendation is simple:
  
  PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE
PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

- **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, wait for a few days, and critically re-evaluate.
Roadmap

1. Designing Slides
2. Developing Arguments
3. Presenting Slides
4. Helping Yourself
5. 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.
- 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

- If you don’t plan to say it, then leave it out.

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
    (as I said above, plan to say everything that is on the slide, including in the table).
  - If you need 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**
  - Makes sure the audience knows where you are going.
  - Allows to leave out less important material when time pressure builds.
  - Allows to use the same set of slides for presentations of different length.
Structure your presentation clearly

- Introduction: motivation and summary
- Main part: develop arguments
- Conclusion: summary and take-away message
- Back up slides: details of the arguments, proofs, answers to possible questions (as many slides as you want, you will hardly need them)
Don’t confuse people with elegant variation

- Use the same concepts throughout the talk
  - If you introduce, say, the firm, then it’s the firm.
  - Save people the effort it takes to realize that synonyms (company etc) mean the same.
- Use established concepts, conventions, notation
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. Presenting Slides

Stick out your neck, don’t clear your throat

- **Start your presentation with your idea/thesis/question**
  - Don’t provide excuses, intellectual history etc.
  - Don’t hide behind authority by reviewing the literature.

- **Write the first sentences of your presentation on private notes or memorize them**
  - Guarantees a good start and builds momentum.
Provide direction

- Offer recalls, transitions, and previews
  - Where are we coming from?
  - Where are we going?

- Periodically collect people that you may have lost
  - “The key point is ...”
  - “What I want you to take away is ...”
  - “Any questions?”
  - “Everyone on board?”
Take charge of your presentation

- Allow questions but don’t encourage follow up questions
- Postpone questions that are out of logical order
  - Write down the questions you postpone to make sure you don’t forget to answer them.
- Ensure that things don’t get out of hand
  - “Let’s talk about that after the presentation”.
  - “I now need five/ten minutes without questions to deliver my main point”.
Learn how to answer questions

- **Gain time before answering**
  - Listen to the question until the end.
  - Repeat the question and ask for clarification.

- **Adjust your answer to the situation**
  - Answer clarifying questions as briefly as possible (“Yes”, “No” …).
  - Use “Yes–But” technique if you disagree with a question.

- **Think about obvious questions in advance**
  - Preempt obvious and important questions.
  - Prepare answers to other obvious questions in your back up slides or notes.
4. 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
  - gets ready to fight and releases adrenaline
  - stops higher reasoning and goes on autopilot.
- Some adrenalin is necessary to help you perform.
- 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
- 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.
5. 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 PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE
Valuable advice from others

• John Cochrane: *Writing Tips for Ph. D. Students* (tips for writing and presenting, if you only read one, this is my favorite).


• William Zinsser: *On Writing Well* (introduction to writing in general)