

How to Make Academic Presentations

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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

Presenting well is important for your career

- Busy people prefer to communicate through presentations.
- Reading is too time consuming.
- Interacting helps them understand new material.

My goal is to introduce you to basic skills and techniques

- My most important recommendation is simple: PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!
- Experience how your slides work in practice presentations.
- Get feedback, wait a few days, and critically re-evaluate.

1. Designing Slides

Set achievable goals

- 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**
 - Go beyond what is on the slides (explanation, example, discussion).
 - My slides are sparse, but I need 2–3 minutes to deliver each one.

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 more than 10 numbers, consider turning the table into a figure.

2. Developing Arguments

Develop your arguments in newspaper style, not in joke 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.

Don't confuse people with elegant variation

- **Use the same concepts throughout the presentation**
 - If you introduce, say, the firm, then it's the firm.
 - Save people the effort it takes to realize that synonyms mean the same (company, corporation, decision maker, producer).
- **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.

Use the shortest way of communicating

Bad

at this point in time

depressed socioeconomic area

the reason being

we are currently experiencing precipitation

the train will make its entrance in the following minutes

very innovative and novel features

Good

now

slum

because

it is raining

train arriving

contribution

3. Presenting Slides

Stick out your neck, don't clear your throat

- **Start your presentation with your idea, thesis, or 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.
 - Builds momentum to get you over the hump.

Provide structure and direction

- **Clearly structure your presentation**
 - Introduction, body, conclusion.
 - Back up slides: full tables, proofs, answers to possible questions.
- **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 ...”
 - “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.
 - I often use the white board for that.
- **Ensure that things don't get out of hand**
 - “Let's talk about that after the presentation”.
 - “I now need ten minutes without questions to deliver my main point”.

Answer questions effectively

- **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 possible questions in advance**
 - Preempt the key questions (“One might think ...”).
 - Prepare answers to remaining questions and put them into the back up slides.

4. Helping Yourself

Understand the biology behind the reactions of your body

- **Your body interprets a big presentation 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.**
- **Routinize as much as possible**
 - In the spirit of Yogi Berra:
“90% of a presentation is routine and the other half is mental”.
 - You will make mistakes when you improvise, particularly under pressure (that’s why the training of airplane pilots aims to minimize improvisation).
 - **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.
 - 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.

Use the natural speech rhythm to your advantage

- **Keep sentences short and direct and talk slowly.**
- **Make a deliberate full stop after each sentence and breathe out and in.**
- **Modulate your voice**
 - Imagine reading a story to children or telling a joke in a bar.
 - Practice reading aloud to imaginary listeners or your colleagues and friends.

Show respect

- **Avoid colloquial language and dress appropriately.**
 - Overdress slightly.
- **Take responsibility for failures, don't blame the audience**
 - Bad: “Did you understand this?”
 - Good: “Did I explain this well?”
- **Do not go overtime**
 - If you are done early, then answer open questions or talk about future work.
 - Alternatively, just finish early.

5. Conclusion

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.**

... and PREPARE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Some advice from others

- John Cochrane: *Writing Tips for Ph. D. Students* (tips for writing and presenting).
- D. McCloskey: *Economical Writing, Third Edition* (introduction to writing in economics; a short version was published in the *Economic Inquiry*).
- William Zinsser: *On Writing Well* (introduction to writing in general).