TIPS FOR EXCELLENT ORAL PRESENTATIONS[1]
Guidelines for Graduate Students

When giving a presentation at a professional meeting, it is essential to put forth not only a contribution to scientific knowledge in the field, but a presentation that is clear, concise, rigorous, and "accessible" to everyone in the room. The giving of such a presentation, free from the common faults, using quality, smoothly-presented visual aids, and kept within the allotted time has become a mark of professional competence and courtesy. The following guidelines are offered to help graduate students giving oral presentations attain this happy state. Some of them can and will be enforced by the meeting staff, but the remainder, are dependent on the efforts, good will, and professional pride of the participants.

PLANNING YOUR PRESENTATION

Remember that you are trying to tell an interesting story about your project in a way that people will remember what you found. Most scientific presentations have 4 sections: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion/Implications. However, feel free to use a slightly different structure, the key is to tell an interesting and clear story about your project. For example, if your study includes several experiments that build on one another, it might be best to describe methods and results for each experiment successively. (i.e., Exp. 1- Methods, Results; Exp. 2 - Methods, Results; instead of, Methods-Exp. 1, Exp 2; Results - Exp. 1, Exp. 2). Think about how you can arrange your talk to help the audience follow you from beginning to end.

Start by thinking about results. What do you want your audience to remember when they leave the room? You won't have time to describe everything you found in your thesis or dissertation. Select the main findings you want your audience to remember. This will lead you to thinking about the graphs or tables you want to present. Keep in mind, you only have 8 to 10 minutes to talk, you will only be able to present 4 to 6 data slides of your results. Be careful – the more data you present, the less your audience will remember.

Conclusions – the "take home message." After you know what results you are going to present, write a few concluding statements. These statements will help your audience relate your results to the "real world" and help them understand how your study relates to other published research and/or management practices.

How did you get the data? The next step is to think about how you can clearly and briefly describe the methods used in your project. Present only the methods that are necessary to understand your results. Use diagrams and pictures as much as possible to clearly describe how you got your data.

The last step... "The Introduction". The last step of your planning should be to decide the first things you will say to your audience. Your basic goal is to get your audience interested in your study and help them understand why it is important. Consider relating your research to current events or important management challenges.

SPEAKING TIPS

Talk, Don't Read. People have come to hear you talk. Speaking and writing are so different that you will sound dull if you read monotonously from a condensed version of your latest manuscript or thesis. Prepare notes specifically for an informal address and force yourself to speak naturally and to avoid jargon. But don't depend on these notes - there probably won't be enough light to see them. It's best to make your slides in such a way that they serve as your notes; and to know your subject so well that you could give the talk smoothly without slides or notes.

On the Other Hand, Don't Be Too Informal. Many speakers tend to make "cute" remarks during the presentation, often disparaging their own data and/or visual aids. Data described as "smoking hot," "first cut," etc. should neither be presented nor so described. Make sure to use professional pictures – no funny pictures or cartoons. Such actions can damage your reputation and offend the audience.

Stimulate the Audience. Present your ideas with a few verbal punches to stimulate your listeners. Look at the audience and look for nods of agreement or signs of differing viewpoints. You will find that this kind of communication is more rewarding than just reading your notes. If some listeners are so bored that they walk out (or fall asleep), at least you will see them go. And next time you will prepare a more exciting paper.

PRESENTATION GRAPHICS

Electronically projected "slide shows" (like MS Powerpoint) have become the standard at scientific meetings. In fact, if you want to use old-fashioned "slides" you should double check to make sure a slide projector is available. There are a plethora of disasters that can happen when you take an electronic presentation file that looks great on your computer, put it on a disk or memory stick, and hand it to the session coordinator to be projected by an unknown computer on and untested projector. A few tips to avoid disaster: 1) Keep the fonts and bullets simple. 2) Test your presentation on several computers. 3) Bring your presentation to the session on several types of media (i.e., CD, memory stick, flash card). 4) Clearly label the file and your disk with your name (i.e., don't name it "SRM Presentation"). 5) Arrive at the session early to make sure your presentation works.

Good slides amplify and clarify your message, stimulate interest, and help you to keep "on track." They merit the same care in preparation as the commentary. Slides that cannot be read when projected lessen the impact and effectiveness of the presentation; in other words, the primary consideration is legibility. Keep it simple, make text big, and test your presentation before you arrive at the meeting.

- Use a colored background with clear text in a contrasting color. Some people argue that it is good to use a light background color with dark letters because it creates some light in the room that may otherwise be very dark. Others prefer a dark background color with light text because it is often easier to read. Use your own judgment, but be careful not to make the background color too dark. A new trend in electronic presentation is to use pictures as a background – this can be effective but is often distracting.

- Limit each slide to one main idea. Include no more than you will discuss on each slide. Use several simple slides rather than one complicated one, especially if you must discuss a subject at length.

- Use as little text as possible and leave space between lines. Use a large and simple font. Test your graphics by projecting your slides on a standard-sized screen in a partially darkened room. Then, make sure you can read everything when you stand 50 to 75 feet from the screen.

- If you have to say "Some of you may not be able to see this, but . . ." DON'T SHOW THAT SLIDE! If the slide is not legible from every point in the auditorium, it is useless. Never take an illustration from a thesis or printed paper; the print is usually too small and there will be too much unnecessary detail.

- Avoid extensive use of acronyms. You might know what treatment "NT+/-" is, but your audience may have forgotten.

- Include titles to supplement, not duplicate, slide data.

- Use duplicates if you need to refer to the same slide at several times in your talk.

- Avoid fancy slide transitions and action/animation features. These features can be effective, but they can easily become distracting. Plus, remember you will probably be nervous and it may be difficult to hit the advance button for every bullet statement. When it comes to slide transitions... less is more.

- Film clips and audio features are great new options available in computer projected presentations. These features can be extremely effective but, they are risky with a high chance of failure. These options should be avoided with our current state of technological capabilities at professional meetings.

PREPARE FOR A SMOOTH PRESENTATION

- Rehearse your presentation several times so that you will be familiar with the sequence and timing of the slides. There is usually a "Speaker Preparation" room at the meeting for you to run through your slides one last time before you give your presentation.

- On your trip, carry the disk that contains your presentation with you; don't trust it to your baggage if it is checked through.

- Give your presentation file to the projectionist before the session, when you'll have time to discuss any special instructions necessary to load your presentation. Follow specific guidelines sent to you or published in the meeting program.

- If you need a laser pointer, one will probably be available. However, you may want to bring one with you just to make sure. When you point at the screen, rest your elbow on the podium, if possible, to keep the laser dot from "shaking" on the screen.

KEEP ON SCHEDULE

There are several good reasons for keeping your presentation comfortably within the allotted time. Doing so will help prevent illness of or mayhem by the program chairman and/or session moderator. But more important, it is a professional courtesy to your colleagues who, usually, wish to move freely between various sessions to "catch" specific papers. If one session runs off schedule this entire system breaks down. Also, those speakers following you deserve their full allotted time - it's not available for you to "borrow." Don't make your session moderator take "police action" against you - do it yourself by planning and rehearsing your presentation.

- Your formal comments should last about 8 minutes (Absolutely, no more than 9 minutes).

- Leave about 2 minutes for questions. At the end of your talk make a nice transition statement such as, "*These are the results of my study, now I invite your questions or comments.*"

- If you are worried about how time will progress during your talk, bring a clock/watch that is easy to read with you to the podium, or ask a colleague to give you a sign when you are at the mid-point and near the end.

ONE LAST TIP

Let your professors, fellow grad students, and colleagues help you! Give your talk to a few people who will give you honest and constructive criticism before the meeting. A little criticism during your preparation can really make you look great in the end!