

How to approach a 15-minute presentation



Important Note

Before you decide on whether to use software such as PowerPoint, you should make sure that the conference will be able to provide these technologies. Also, make sure that you have all the necessary connectors. Most conferences will provide you with a standard VGA connector, but some computers require special converter cables.

Giving presentations in class and at conferences is a necessary evil in academic life. Not only is it a lot of work, many people also have serious concerns regarding public speaking, or their ability to communicate in a non-native language. It's said that the fear of public speaking—or *glossophobia*—is one of the top phobias that people have (topping the fear of death, spiders, darkness and heights). Fortunately,

News Flash!

This may come as a surprise, but PowerPoint is *not* a fancy version of an overhead projector. If your slides resemble the type of slides that use overhead projectors, you're really not tapping into the potential of some of these programs. For one thing, get rid of the black text on white background. It's hideous.

there are ways to overcome this, and instead of seeing presentations as terrifying ordeals, if you prepare well and practice often, you can get through it. You might even have fun along the way.

The aim of this handout is to give you some tips on how to

approach these presentations. Note that there are many kinds of presentations people give in their professional lives, all of which differ in style and structure to academic presentations. Sometimes it is helpful to look at speeches and lectures given by businesspeople or politicians just to get a broader scope of presentation styles. My suggestion for the best of presentations would be TED (www.ted.com).

In academic conferences, presentation formats are usually described in the call for papers (CFP) and/or on the conference websites. These formats include poster sessions, roundtables, paper sessions, panels, symposium, and so on. Conferences vary in the way they define them, so be sure to check the CFP. Sometimes, when your presentation is part of a larger group (e.g. panel or symposium), you might have a chair who would reorganize it in another way so check with the chair as well. For our purposes, we will focus on the typical 15-20 minute presentation on a research that you (or your group) has conducted.

MAKING AWESOME SLIDES

Overall, your slides should be **consistent** and **simple**. By consistent, I mean that font type, size,

and slide transitions, if any. Transitions are good to signal the audience that you are moving on, but too complicated effects can be annoying.

Some people might tell you to put a lot of text on each bullet point, so much so that you are pretty much just reading your bullet points. Well, they are *wrong* because people are attracted to text, and when they see a bunch of them, they will want to read it and they will ignore what you have to say. Another reason you do not want to have too many words per bullet point is that you might be tempted to read them verbatim. Being read to for 15-minutes can be a pretty boring experience, so don't let that happen. Your bullet points should contain key words only. In general, try to limit each point to about 5-10 words. That way your audience will see that main point and then focus on what you have to say.

Sometimes you might need to include a block quote that you feel is especially poignant to a point you are making. In those cases, be sure to read the quote to the audience, and try to highlight any parts that you want them to focus on. Using software like PowerPoint, you can create two slides of your quote. On the second slide, make the text you want to highlight into another, visually captivating but readable color, then create a dissolve slide transition in between them. That way, it will make it look like you are highlighting a passage of text. Of course, make sure you cite all your sources so that the audience can retrace your quote if they want.

If you have graphics such as charts, tables, or graphs, make sure that the audience can see the difference between variables. Also, explain the visuals to the audience so that they see why you

have included it. If you have a complex graphic (like a flowchart) that you want to explain using several slides, you should include the graphic as a handout.

STRUCTURING YOUR PRESENTATION

If you are presenting on research, the audience typically expects it to follow the format of an academic essay: Introduction/background, conceptual framework, methods, findings, analysis, conclusions/implications. The audience is usually most interested in your findings and analysis, so that should make up most of your slides.

It is important to take into account what your audience might already know. Most of our research intersects with a couple of areas, and conferences differ in how general or specific they may be. For example, if you are presenting at a linguistics conference, you might not have to spend so much time explaining your linguistic theory. However, if your audience is a more general, education audience, you might want to spend a little bit more time on it. It is impossible to fully explain your conceptual framework in great detail within a span on 1-2 minutes, so don't worry about that. People who are interested can always contact you later and

read up on the theories themselves.

PREPARING FOR THE BIG DAY

Try to find out as much about the room you are presenting. If possible, visit the room a day before the presentation so that you are prepared for any surprises. Make sure you are ready if the room is too cold or warm. If you are using technology provided by the conference organizers, test it out to see if it is compatible with the files you have. For example, if

Just Say No to Clipart!

Some presenters feel the need to make their slides more interesting and fun by putting in a lot of clipart. Clipart are readymade pictures that you can find in some programs or online. They are usually cartoony and unprofessional-looking. Avoid them at all costs!

If you want to use visuals, go to professional photography sites that offer royalty-free, high resolution photos. These are photos that people, many of whom are professionals, have taken and sharing with the public for free. Check out morguefile.com for a large collection.



you have used fancy fonts or international scripts, they might not show up on a computer that doesn't have those fonts installed. Also, if you are using video and/or audio, you want to check the video and sound quality. Some rooms that are too brightly lit might make your slides hard to read if you have used a dark text on light background scheme.

TO READ OR NOT TO READ

As an academic, you should do your best not to read your presentation for 15 minutes. There are several good reasons not to do that: 1) It is harder to improvise; 2) It is easy to lose your place and get flustered; 3) It is harder to follow; 4) You are more likely to forget to make eye contact; 5) It is boring; 6) Really boring. In some cases, it might be acceptable to read from a script. Sometimes that's just what you need to get over your first presentation experience. In general, you should try your best to avoid it.

If you are absolutely more comfortable reading, consider using note cards instead. Make the fonts large, double-spaced, and put page numbers on all of them so you can keep them in order. With note cards, write on one side so you don't have to flip back and forth throughout your presentation. If you are using a script, type it so that it still sounds like you are talking to the audience. If your presentation sounds like academic essays that you find in journals, your audience will probably not understand a whole lot of your presentation because those essays employ a different discourse style. In

essays, readers can go back and reread things that they don't understand, but the audience cannot do that. In your presentation, you will have to make sure you make all those connections clear to your audience.

HANDOUTS

You do not have to have handouts. If you do, they should focus on things (e.g. complex charts) that you want your audience to look at as you explain them. Some people just make a copy of their entire presentation, but that is a waste of time and paper because your audience will likely not pay attention to what you say. On all your handouts, be sure to include your name, presentation title and contact information in case someone wants to get back to you.

TAKING QUESTIONS

It is not always easy anticipating what questions your audience might ask. The best way to prepare is to imagine that you have a diverse audience with different interests, and then generate questions from these different viewpoints. Consider the types of questions that a teacher, psychologist, policy-maker, academic, or linguist might ask. You might also think about what kind of conference you are attending and what type of people might be in the audience.

When you are asked a question, listen to it very carefully and be sure to answer it as best you can. It is okay not to know the answer to a question. Just politely defer it by promise to follow-up on it. This might even

give you the opportunity to contact someone after the conference and establish a connection. Most of the time, the audience is polite and considerate, so don't be too worried.

FINAL NOTE

Above all, know your style and know your comfort zone. All other advice should be secondary. Conferences are a little like riding a bicycle. It sounds scary at first, and you might get a few scrapes along the way (okay, maybe that wasn't the best analogy...), but it will get easier as you get more practice. A good way to learn (other than getting lots of practice) is to attend conferences and see how other people present. If you found a particular presentation good, ask yourself why it was good, and whether the presenter did anything you can emulate.

And finally, remember to relax. Get lots of rest the night before, and eat something. You will be fine. Trust me.

Useful Websites

Professional Photos

www.morguefile.com

AERA presentation tips

www.aera.net/meetings/Default.aspx?menu_id=22&id=299

Guide to good presentations

irs.ed.uiuc.edu/students/scagnoli/presentations/

www.shkaminski.com/Courses/Handouts/powerpoint.htm

Exemplary presentations

www.ted.com