

Giving conference papers and presentations: a short guide (May 2017)
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Below are my key suggestions to giving a strong presentation. General tips are on the reverse. **People engage with presentations fundamentally differently from written work.** This is a curse and a blessing; when listening to a presentation, people have a harder time following dense analysis, but they are better at thinking big picture.

Structure

1. Hook: An anecdote or example that draws the reader in and embodies your argument. It, along with the title, will explain the focus of the paper.
2. Overview: Summarizes what you're saying and why we should care.
3. Content: This is the body of your talk.
4. Conclusion: Reiterates your overview. Also (can) introduce bigger questions.

Few talks actually follow this clear a format. As a result, audiences are generally bored, confused, or both.

Clarity

Talks should never, ever, be dense. You want people able to follow you. Generally this means that **you can only speak to one key theme or idea.** Ask yourself: "what one thing do I want my audience to take away from this?" At most, they're only going to remember one thing from your talk anyways.

People are distracted, so repetition is always good. In writing, repeating identical phrases can be a bad thing, but it's actually important in a talk. Similarly, signposting is vital. Don't be afraid to say "my argument is...", or "in conclusion..."

Performance

A conference paper is a performance. Therefore, you need to think about how to communicate your ideas in an engaging way.

- Think about your audience. A presentation for specialists looks different from a presentation for a general academic audience, which looks different from a talk at the local retirement communication.
- **All good performances start with practice.** Be sure to practice your talk, including questions (if you have a partner).
- Enthusiasm goes a long way. Think about what makes you excited about your topic and how to communicate that to your audience. When answering questions, be excited and interested. This saves you when you don't know the answer; saying something like "I hadn't thought about that," or "I need to think about that more," makes the questioner feel good and makes people more willing to share their thoughts. It does not make you look unprepared.

Minor suggestions

Design:

1. Slides are a good, but they should have as few words as possible on them (5-7 at most!). Anything more overwhelms the listener and they will ignore you and focus on the text.
2. A slide should only be up for 1-2 minutes. This helps pace your presentation.
3. If you want to wait a long time before switching slides, consider putting up a blank slide. This also refocuses the listener.
4. Images keep a listener engaged. Any topic has relevant images; if you only include a few, keep the previous tip in mind.

Presentation:

1. Practice, practice, practice. Say your talk to yourself. If you've written the talk, read it aloud to yourself. Practice with a friend and do simulated questions. Practice!
2. Talking from a script vs. bullet points / notes: both approaches work well. It's actually often harder to give a good talk from a written script because it's hard to write how people talk. Talking from notes forces you to think more schematically, which is good. That said, I've seen masterful examples of both.
3. Be comfortable. Dressing professionally is important, but make sure you don't feel uncomfortable in what you're wearing. This might mean practicing in what you're going to wear or wearing something similar the day before, even around the house.
4. If you're nervous, getting to the room early can often help. Try chatting with other people on the panel or other people in the room, this helps build a connection with the audience and can make you less nervous.
5. On that point, feeling nervous is completely normal. It will get less acute over time.

Argument / content:

1. Talks are the best place to trial new ideas. You get high-level feedback and you only need a few illustrative examples rather than a wealth of evidence.
2. Dense historiographic analyses can work for talks, but only if that's the central focus of your talk and your audience is very specialized. Otherwise it's too hard to follow.
3. People love lists of threes, but they think in binaries. If you want people to understand an idea, set up a contrast or difference (binary), and if you want people to follow along or remember something, try presenting it in three parts.

Note: job talks are more intense and have slightly different requirements. The job talk is always a combination of big picture perspective on your work (breadth) and then a deep dive into a couple of examples (depth). If you put all the advice here in that context, these suggestions are applicable to job talks as well.

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