

Giving an Effective Academic Presentation

Scholars are often called upon to present their research to the academic community; at conferences during qualifying exams and thesis defenses, in job talks and invited lectures, discussing your research in public is a key part of participating in the community of scholars. It can be hard, however, to know where to begin when putting together an academic presentation.

Some general concerns to keep in mind: Presentation quality is related to three things: content, design, and delivery.

- Content, in this context, is most likely your research
- Design: slides should construct a narrative about your subject, and be easy to follow—they should present information in small chunks of key info. Don't be afraid to include visual support—pictures, graphs and charts, even video files.
- Delivery has to do with how you interact with audience. Some key points: speak loudly and slowly enough to be heard, make eye contact, and do not try to memorize your whole talk

When you are beginning to write a presentation, you want to think about the Four 'P's: Purpose, People, Point, and Place. Here are some questions you'll want to consider:

- Purpose – Ask yourself: What is the presentation meant to accomplish? What are the 'what' and the 'why' of the presentation—what subject material will you cover? Why are you doing it? To educate? To persuade? To motivate? To entertain?
- People – Who is the audience? What are the important points for them to learn? What background info will you need to give them? What are their values and concerns? What kind of evidence or discussion will they find persuasive?
- Point – This is related to the 'why' of purpose. What is the end result? How will your audience be affected by the presentation?
- Place – These are some of the more practical concerns about your presentation. Where will you be giving the talk? You may need to consider details like:
 - How big is the room?
 - What is the layout of the furniture?
 - What kind of technology is available to you? Is there a microphone? A podium?
 - Where will you be standing?
 - Where are the electrical outlets?
 - What is the lighting like? Will it detract from your slides?
 - Is the room quiet? Are there any obvious distractions?

Presentations can be challenging, but there are some general tips that can help:

- Don't just read your slides! Your audience can read them more quickly than you can discuss them, and they'll tune out from the spoken part of your presentation. Your slides should cover basic key facts, but not every detail you will be discussing.
- Engage your audience visually. Don't just look at your slides or notes—make eye contact with your audience. Your presentation is part of a larger scholarly discussion; treat it as part of that conversation.

- Consider putting key evidence (quotations, images, charts, and so on) and definitions of more important terms on a handout for your audience to refer to throughout the talk. This saves you the time of having to describe evidence, letting you concentrate on analyzing your data, and giving your audience something to refer back to as you do so.
- And, remember – ALWAYS make sure you stick to your allotted time! We've probably all been at conferences where a presenter went over their time limit—remember how frustrating the audience appeared to find it? Don't be that person! Make sure you practice your talk enough to know how much material you cover in the time you are given, and you'll avoid annoying or disrespecting the audience and the other speakers.

In academia, there are, generally speaking, three different forms that presentations tend to take:

- Poster presentations are most common in the sciences, but can also be used in the humanities. They offer a concise presentation of research in the form of a large poster, next to which the presenter stands. They should be seen as a conversation starter, inspiring the audience to talk with you further about your research.
 - Most people spend a maximum of 5 minutes looking at the poster
 - The information, then, should be restricted to a main theme. Ask yourself, "If people only remember one point about my research, what should it be?"
 - A poster presentation should have a title, a clear statement of the problem or research question, illustrations of your evidence, and perhaps most importantly, should be readable from a distance—if your audience can't read your poster, they won't stop to talk with you about it!
- Paper presentations are a longer presentation of your research allowing for more detailed discussion of your work.
 - Usually a paper presentation will be 15-20 minutes on a panel with other speakers, but sometimes (at job talks or invited lectures, for example), they may be longer.
 - A clear thesis statement, and meta-discourse (saying things like, "First I will discuss X, then Y, before concluding Z) will help your audience follow the argument.
- Roundtable presentations are several short talks on a particular theme or subject, followed by discussion
 - Usually you will have 5-10 minutes to discuss your research or contribution to the topic.
 - The focus is on discussion amongst the panel members

The format of presentations will vary from discipline to discipline, but all presentations will most likely include the following:

- An introduction, subject overview, or other hook to get the audience's interest.
- Your theoretical framework, and the problem or research question you are addressing
- Your methodology, and/or the case studies or texts you have selected to focus on
- A review of the critical background and literature on the subject
- Discussion of your data or results
- Analysis of this evidence

- Your conclusions

Different disciplines tend to have different practices for presenting, too. In the humanities, the preference is for reading a paper aloud. The papers usually must be re-written to be read aloud; a publishable article or dissertation chapter will likely be too complicated for the listeners to follow. In the sciences, the more common practice is to talk aloud from notes, usually with a powerpoint presentation or other slides. In both cases, it is essential to practice the talk in order to stick to the allotted time!

Did you know that a study published in the *New York Times* showed that Americans identified their greatest fear as public speaking? More people claimed to be afraid of public speaking than even of death! Nervousness about giving a research presentation is completely normal, and you're likely to experience it at some point in your career. Here are some strategies for handling those nerves:

- General tips
 - Don't expect perfection from yourself
 - Avoid equating public speaking with self-worth
 - You're going to be nervous—most people are!—so don't be nervous about your nervousness
 - Don't memorize every word
 - Make eye contact
 - Act as confident as you can, and you'll be perceived that way
- Think about organizing your information via the chunking principle:
 - Presents information in small, easy-to-understand (digestible) units
 - Digestible units contain no more than nine separate items of information
 - This makes it easier for you to remember and access information
 - It also reduces stress from trying to remember too much at once (like, for example, word-for-word memorization of your talk)
 - Finally, chunking gives you flexibility to adapt presentation according to audience engagement and/or participation, time limits, or if sequence/wording of prepared sentences goes amiss, while still staying on subject