Presentations

Communicating to an audience of peers and to the general public about your work is an important component of a successful research career. Giving presentations to an audience can be very nerve wracking even for a well spoken, knowledgeable professional. Effective presentation techniques can be learned and with practice everyone can improve on their efforts. These tips and ideas can help you improve on your presentation skills.

BASICS OF A GOOD PRESENTATION

- Know your Talk Parameters
    - o What type of presentation are you giving?
        - Invited presentation
        - Research paper
        - Q&A
        - Panel Discussion
    - o Time allotted?
        - Does the time allotted include questions?
- Know your Audience
    - o Expert, Novice, Mixed?
        - Level of familiarity will determine relative time spent on different aspects of your presentation
        - Novice or mixed audience may need more background information and "big picture" focus
        - Expert audience can absorb more detailed and specific information on your work
    - o Use of jargon
        - Limit use of jargon, especially to a mixed or novice audience
- Know your Topic – you are the expert in the room (at least with regard to your project!)
    - o Main topic you will address
        - Use one sentence that will convey your purpose and get attention of audience
            - It may take the form of a question
        - Focus on 2- 3 main points (Ries & Leukefeld, 1998)

- Most people will remember 1-2 keys points
  - o Concluding sentence
    - Serves as a reminder of your purpose and how your work addressed it
    - Suggests next steps
    - Remember to conclude at the conclusion! Don't include a lot of verbiage after stating your conclusion (Tierney, 1996)
  - o Transitions
    - Draft and practice different transitions between points.
      - Make sure that the transitions keep the audience on board w/your main points
  - o Key words/phrases (Tierney, 1996)
    - Repeat through out the stages of the talk to keep audience focused
    - Use a mnemonic if appropriate
  - o Help audience follow our logic by planning your talk around that logic
      - Start w/most important concept and move down the list
- Know your delivery (Mayer, 2005)
  - o Its not just what you say but how you say it
    - Vocal component
      - Inflection
        - o Which words or phrases could be emphasized to highlight important points? (Tierney, 1996)
      - Pace
        - o Resist urge to rush and speak too quickly
        - o Use an occasional pause to let message sink in or to allow audience to consider a particularly important point or question (Tierney, 1996)
      - Pitch
        - o Monotone delivery = nap time
    - Visual
      - Dress in keeping with (or one step beyond) your audience
      - Body language
        - o Use your hands to express or emphasize point

- o Relax but use good posture and orient toward your audience
- o Beware of and control nervous habits by practicing before hand. Seek to stop the dreaded "uhm", hair twisting, throat clearing, and twitches
  - ▪ Talk to your audience
    - Don't look at slides or at podium
    - You should be making eye contact with your audience – this gives immediate feedback on your message
    - Do not rely on your laser pointer completely. Do not give your audience motion sickness by constantly flashing it across the screen. What you say is more important than laser pointing to some small detail.
- Know your Timing (http://www.kumc.edu/SAH/OTEd/jradel/Preparing_talks/137.html)
  - o Try the following suggestions to get into a good ballpark range
    - ▪ Estimate a rate of speaking about 100 words per minute
      - Conversation occurs at about 300 words/minute
    - ▪ Each statement you make will require an average of 12 words
    - ▪ Each concept will need to be supported by 3 - 4 statements
  - o Try to keep tone conversational
    - ▪ Even if you are doing most of the talking, you want to engage your audience in the topic through your tone. Do not blast them with information.
  - o Use relevant visual aids to support your key points (see next section)
    - ▪ You might have hand outs that augment your visuals/talk
    - ▪ Have a back up plan in case the technology you plan to use fails you
- Know your Q&A
  - o This is the least predictable part of your presentation but you should anticipate some of the likely questions and be prepared to answer them
    - ▪ Have one question to propose in case you need to get the ball rolling
  - o When answering a question
    - ▪ Always repeat the question before answering
      - Will help audience if they didn't hear question when it was asked

- Will help you make sure you understand question
  - Don't hurry to answer
    - Take a moment to reflect and be sure you are answering what was asked
  - If you are stumped, admit it and get back to the person who asked the question later
- Other ideas
  - PRACTICE!
    - Use practice to remove extraneous information, increase clarity, get timing down
    - Assemble an audience for your practice talks
      - Use mentors and/or support groups (CRDS will help arrange an audience-contact beth.donaghey@vanderbilt.edu, 3-3200)
      - Use a mirror to practice your body language and eye contact
    - Use whatever visual aides or technology you will be using as you practice your talk
  - Day of your talk (or maybe the day before!)
    - Get familiar w/room
    - Get familiar w/technology set up and people who will be helping you
      - Discuss a back up plan should technology fail
    - Get a few minutes (15 – 30 if possible) to center yourself before your talk

VISUAL AIDES IN YOUR PRESENTATION

Edward Tufte has written some excellent books on graphics and presentation of material (E. R. Tufte, 1983)

- Visual Aides
  - Should enhance your talk -- not a mirror but an asset (Ryan-Wenger, 1994)
    - Should not replicate your talk
    - Do not add lots of additional information
    - Should a able to convey message within 3-5 seconds of showing
      - Allow audience this time to absorb the information (don't talk)
- Rules of thumb for visual aides
  - Most meaning w/simplest form (Pearson, 1997)

- - 3 criteria for charts/tables (Ryan-Wenger, 1994)

    - Simplicity

    - Clarity

    - Continuity

  - User friendly graphics include (E. R. Tufte, 1983)

    - Clear, detailed and thorough labels

    - Consistent scales throughout

    - Context for comparison

- Technology for visual aides

  - Most commonly used is PowerPoint

    - Microsoft estimates that 30 million PowerPoint presentations are made every day (Goldstein, 2003)

  - PowerPoint – evil or necessary (Farkas, 2006)

    - Tufte and others have criticized PowerPoint in particular stating that it

      - Impairs thinking and communication

        - Forcing complicated ideas into "bulleted" lists

      - Favors style of content

      - Disrupts, dominates and trivializes content (E. Tufte, 2003)

      - Buries key points

- Slide design/presentation ideas

  - Content

    - Use no more than 6 lines of text per slide.

    - Use no more than 7 words per line of text.

    - Avoid using a number of text slides in a row during the presentation

    - Convey not the details (the "what") to the audience but the message – what does it mean to the audience (the "so what") (Doumont, 2005)

    - A rule of thumb is to plan no more than one slide per 90 seconds. Less is often better

  - Clarity

    - Font (type)

      - Bold sans serif typestyle like Arial of at least 18 points (M. Alley & Robershaw, 2004)

- o Sans serif are read more quickly allowing audience to process slide as quickly as possible so they can focus on what you are saying
        - o Boldface is best – readable from distance. Italic or underline hard to read especially at angle
    - ALL CAPS slows reading time
  - Font size (Daffner, 2003)
    - Titles 44 or 48 point
    - Subheadings 32 for first level, 28 points second and 24 for third level
  - Color scheme (Daffner, 2003)
    - Darker background w/light color for lettering
- o Animation
  - Often distracting and easy to overdo
  - Decrease clutter by decreasing low content items like colors, clip art, typographical features (Doumont, 2005)
- Slide Design (in part to answer Tufte's and others criticism)
  - o National lab design – Sentence headlines
    - Short sentence headline supported primarily by images (M. Alley & Robershaw, 2004)
      - Sentence headline states slides purpose – increases retention in audience (Alley et al., 2006)
      - Justify and begin in upper left corner
      - Headline will help presenter focus as well
      - Helps slide "stand alone" as notes for talk
      - Rely on images (and words) in slide body to support the headline
    - Text blocks limited to no more than two lines
    - Limit lists to 2-4 items
    - Use white space

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The default template on PowerPoint won't give you National Lab Design but you can download a template at http://writing.eng.vt.edu/slides.html.

There is also a VUSN slide template – you would have to modify to add the features of the National Lab Design outlined above. If you would like that template, contact beth.donaghey@vanderbilt.edu or stephania.mcneal-goddard@vanderbilt.edu

Another site for slide construction ideas!

http://www.kumc.edu/SAH/OTEd/jradel/Effective_visuals/105.html

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11/2009 Update – a few newer references that may be of interest

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