

THOUGHTS ON ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Giving a talk is much different than writing a manuscript. Sometimes you get the impression that someone is reading a manuscript to you (rather than the text of his/her talk). Manuscripts often have long sentences that are simply too hard to follow during an oral presentation; keep your sentences short.

Illustrations for talks are often not those used in a manuscript. Instead, think of the point you wish to make and design a simple slide to illustrate it. Do not photograph a large table and then inform the audience that they should ignore the first 8 columns and concentrate on columns 9 and 17 in the middle of the slide.

Practice your talk several times in front of a critical audience and do this well before you are scheduled to give it. Listen closely to your helpers' criticisms. Remake slides that are confusing; if you are not sure, they need to be redone. Be sure that you will finish within the time constraints imposed by the meeting (getting booted by the session moderator is extremely poor style). In a full seminar (especially a job seminar), never go over the allotted time. Be sure to leave time for questions. Thus, a seminar scheduled for one hour should include 45-50 minutes (MAX) of talking by you, leaving time for your host to introduce you and questions. Incidentally, an hour-long talk is rather different from a meeting presentation; you can take more time for general background and introduction, and explanation of methods. However, in a full seminar you can only effectively make a few major points. The country preacher approach is pretty good: tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.

Before Your Talk

1. If it is a job seminar, be sure to ask (insist) for 30 minutes to calm yourself before your talk (and do the things in "2" below).
2. Visit the podium or wherever you will give your talk from and
 - a. Get comfortable with the podium or place you will speak from. Meet the moderator ahead of time so that he/she knows who you are.
 - b. Locate the pointer, slide advancer, light switches (and who controls them), and podium light (Note: Many places forget to have a pointer and podium light - do not get caught unprepared). It is really silly when a speaker says "May I have the lights" or "Slides please" or "next slide", and someone from the audience says "You have the controls."
 - c. Locate the proper position for the microphone, if there is one.
 - d. If using 2 X 2 slides, preview them (especially if someone else put them into a carousel for you). Be sure to number the slides just in case they get spilled, etc. Guard your slides or zip disk or CD like a priceless possession.
 - e. Expect the unexpected.

*Excerpted and modified from notes by Bob Zink, Bell Museum, University of Minnesota.

Beginning Your Talk

1. After you are introduced: THANK THE PERSON WHO INTRODUCED YOU, even if it is a short talk at a meeting. If this is a job or invited seminar, have a very short, but not too flowery, acknowledgment for the people who have hosted you, thanking them and telling them that you appreciate the opportunity to visit their department.

2. Far too often, the opening words of a talk are “uh, well, um, ok, let’s see...” BE SURE THAT THE FIRST WORDS OUT OF YOUR MOUTH ARE NOT “WELL, UH, UM, OK, YOU KNOW,’ OR SOME SIMILAR SILLY THING. Begin decisively. Do not begin your talk with “May I have the slides please.” It is important to capture the attention of the audience, by looking at them and establishing contact with them, with the LIGHTS ON. Begin with your general introduction, and then ask for the slides. Some talks are very effective that begin with slides, but most are not.

3. The audience may not need to see the title of your talk as your first slide, especially if the moderator has just read the title to the audience while introducing you. In addition, do not begin your talk with a list of collaborators - place the list at the end if you must (just mention them, and please do not show pictures of your collaborators, unless you really have a good reason).

About Slides

1. Do not have too much information on a slide - remember the 6 X 6 rule. This means that you should make simple slides with one or two general points. If you have long tables or complicated or large figures from a manuscript, DO NOT make them into slides. Make figures for your talk that illustrate only the points you wish to make. Use a large font, and have someone check your figures for misspelled words. If you scan in materials, be certain that there is good contrast and resolution.

2. Plan your presentation so that you have about 1 slide per 1.0-1.5 minutes. You can get away with more slides if they are simple and require only a brief explanation, but many talks are compromised by having TOO many slides.

3. IF YOU HAVE TO APOLOGIZE FOR ANY SLIDE (LIKE IT IS HARD TO READ, TOO DARK, TOO MUCH INFORMATION ON IT, ETC.) DO NOT SHOW IT. There is no excuse for bad slides. If you must show it, do not apologize.

4. Scientific names are *italicized*, even in slides!!!

5. Avoid lead-in slides like “INTRODUCTION”, “METHODS”, etc.

During Your Talk

1. Do not talk to the screen or your notes. **Talk to your audience.**
Do not read to your audience!

2. Do not jingle you keys or change in you pocket or make other distracting noises.

3. Do not talk too fast - write notes to yourself in the margins of your notes (if you use them) like “slow down” or “take a deep breath.”

4. Do not read the text on slides to the audience, unless you have a quote or some passage. In this case, do not talk about something else and expect them to both listen to you and read the slide.

5. Practice your talk so that the closing statements about one slide directly lead into the next one (i.e., anticipate the next slide for you audience).

6. Beware of filler slides of scenery, sunsets, etc. - they often detract from important transitions, or worse, your conclusions. It might be better to leave up a slide you have finished discussing rather than inserting a filler/distracting slide.

7. Be careful with humor - it is great when it works (rarely) and horrible when it fails.

8. Work on not saying "uh", "up", "ok", "you know" by having listeners during your practice talks stop you every time you say one of these filler words. It is ok to have pauses during your talk. It is hard to get used to, but pauses are effective devices to let your audience catch up with you - they will not think you are dumb if there are short pauses, especially at key points. Pauses always seem longer to the speaker than to the audience.

9. Include some general conclusions; there must be something of general interest in your talk. Also, especially for long presentations, I think it is important to end with the lights on. Yes, it is good to stop hiding behind darkness, face your audience, and reestablish the eye contact you made in the beginning.

10. Remember, it is probable that no one knows more about your topic than you, so be confident and at ease.

Ending Your Talk

END YOUR TALK DECISIVELY. Do not just stop and mutter something, as the audience wonders if you are done. **DO NOT END WITH "ARE THERE ANY QUESTIONS?"** because someone will ask you one, and proper protocol calls for applause first. Thus, say something like **"THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION"** or simply **"THANK YOU"**; this cues the audience to applaud. Try to avoid the classless ending like **"WELL, THAT'S ABOUT ALL I HAVE."**

In handling questions, avoid combative answers. Do not reply to a question with "I get that question all the time." In essence, it is akin to saying "Boy, what a common question - can't you think of something insightful?" If you are asked a particular question all the time, your seminar is deficient in not addressing an obvious point. Be sure to ask for clarification if you do not understand a question, and do not hesitate to say you do not have an answer now but would like to think about it and talk later.

BOTTOM LINE: The best talks are those in which the introduction clearly establishes "what and why" issues, the transitions between slides are smooth and logical, and the conclusions return to the introduction.