

# Advice on Presenting Talks at Scientific Conferences

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## Major tips:

1. Presenting talks is an **art** even moreso than writing papers is. Find your own style, by being inspired by those around you and representing who you are as a scientist. Be human. Be informal. Use anecdotes and stories.
2. **A talk is not a paper.** No! Don't present the paper. Present a compelling story. Throw away non-essential details. Who cares what you said in your abstract. Say what you need to say.
3. **Don't read talks.** Ever. It's boring. Finish your talk before the conference and **practice** it night and day until it becomes second nature for you. Have your notes as a crutch if you need to, but your goal for career development should be to get to the point where you can deliver a talk without any notes or even any real practice. This takes years and years. Some scientists never get all the way. But at least don't read the talk. If you memorize a written talk and present it in non-monotone, that's far better.
4. **Present visually compelling talks. Make use of images, movies, etc.** Don't over-use animations/transitions. Get to know how Powerpoint works; experiment, it's a handy program. Don't have clutter.
5. **Don't read the slides.** Your audience is not children. Keep text 24+pt or so unless non-essential. Use shorthand, not long sentences. Shorthand helps you weave your words around the key points without reading the slides.
6. Start strong and end strong. That's what people remember. Start not by reading your title, name etc... zzzzzzzz. Start with a "hook"- a statement that draws the audience into your talk and gets their attention. A joke, an intriguing question that you answer, an anecdote etc... whatever. Be **creative**! Then end not on "future directions" or even "acknowledgements" but on a strong message that will get the applause you crave. What is the 1 sentence your audience should take home from your talk? It had better be there at/near the end of your talk.
7. I now put acknowledgements as my 2<sup>nd</sup> slide; get them done with early. Thank everyone important, especially those likely to be in the audience.
8. Give credits for art usage (we all need to be better about this) and other sources, but don't cite papers much unless critical; no one will remember your bibliography (don't show a bibliography slide, ever!).
9. Use the available space on the slide, not just a tiny central part. Keep edges clear in case the projector cuts them off though. Don't waste space with having the same header/footer on each slide.
10. I recommend a white background, black text. Simple. Helps your images and words stand out. Add splashes of colour to catch the eye and to avoid dull colour scheme. DON'T use patterned backgrounds, yellow text on white b/g or other poor contrast text, or dark text and b/g. Dark backgrounds turn the conference room dark and put people to sleep; use them carefully. Bright white backgrounds illuminate the room. Don't ever use the default Powerpoint backgrounds (fading dark to lighter blue). Any distraction/pointless embellishment hurts your talk.
11. For goodness sake, TRY YOUR TALK ON THE CONFERENCE PROJECTOR (ideally in the precise same room as your talk; same projector and computer!) well in

advance of your talk. Be proactive. Be pushy if you have to, to be able to do this. There is really **no excuse** for showing up to your talk and finding out that your movies etc don't work. Big disappointment, embarrassment and noob mistake. If you have time to go sightseeing and drinking, you have time to ensure your talk works when it is time to do it!

12. Use a consistent colour and text scheme throughout. Consider using just line breaks rather than bullet points (crude). Avoid clip art and other cheesy things (Comic Sans font), usually.

13. Humour is good. *All things in moderation*. Goals of any talk are to (1) communicate your research, and (2) entertain the audience so they remember you and the talk. This may help them remember #1. How you go about that is up to your style.

14. **Back up** your talk before you leave for the conference: (1) main PC copy, (2) copy on CD/USB drive in different bag, (3) copy in cloud storage like Dropbox, or (if small) your email; i.e. online. NO EXCUSE for losing your talk at the conference. Major fail. Never, ever let that happen.

15. Use nice, clear, simple graphs with labelled axes, units, etc. Same as in a paper, but no slide should have more than 1-2 main plots. Be sure to explain your axes when your plots first appear on the screen, so people immediately understand what the data shown are.

16. Think of your audience and the room you're in. Can people in back see your text and images? You may need to make better use of the projector screen space and font sizes etc to optimize this. Think about it.

17. Don't have an outline slide (Intro, Methods, Results etc... blah) except maybe to emphasize major points/questions, which then get revisited at the end ("I asked this, I found this. The end").

18. Anticipate likely questions from your audience and either be ready to answer them, have a backup slide(s) after your talk to pull up quickly, or have the answers already in your talk to head them off.

19. **Jargon**: use it appropriately! Define it if not common knowledge to your audience. SPEAK TO THE AVERAGE AUDIENCE MEMBER, not to specialists within your minor field. What do they know? If you lose them by speaking above their level, you have failed in your talk's goals. They will get bored/frustrated and tune out.

20. **Manage your nerves**. It is normal to be anxious. Picture your audience in their underwear, tune them out, whatever it takes. Starting strong, with a very well-polished and professional (fun?) first few slides that get you some momentum, is a very good strategy. Get a good night's sleep so you can be clear-headed. Tell your roommates to shut the fuck up if they are partying. Caffeinate if you need it, the day of the talk. Get prescription for beta blockers/relaxation meds if you need help calming down before talk or getting sleep night before. Nervous energy can work against you, but harness it and it can work for you, giving you that spark and zest to carry you through the talk. Learn how to do this. If you feel fear, don't ponder it and psyche yourself out-- charge on in bravely and defeat it!

21. **Breathe, rather than insert "umms"** in between sentences. Practice this. Umms can really annoy your audience.

22. But look at the audience, scan the room even if not focusing on anyone. Don't stare down at your feet/PC/the projector screen.

23. **Budget your time!** (when designing and practicing your talk) Good rule = ~1 slide/minute, roughly, depending on amount of words side/complexity of images used. 15 minute talk = ~3 mins introduction, 5 mins results, 4 mins discussion-conclusions, then ~3 mins for questions. 20 min talk really should leave time for questions; understandable if 15min talk does not, but aim for it. Take time to go through data plots slowly enough.

24. Adrenaline may mean that you present your talk faster than you expected... But avoid going slowly at the beginning of the talk to carefully go over every fine point in the Intro, then having to rush through the key Conclusions! Wrong way around. Find a good, comfortable **tempo** that doesn't lose your audience and stick with that.
25. There's no one right way to give a talk, but there are lots of wrong ways. Get advice, present your talks to your friends, and hone your art.
26. Your audience's attention will vary. Some will listen to your words and not look at the slides, or vice versa, or they may come in late/space out for certain slides. So make your slides clear and simple enough that the audience can follow it, dipping in and out if they must. But don't make them cluttered!
27. Be prepared for your talk to crash, projector to die or otherwise for having to give up and wing the talk. Don't walk away, forfeiting your talk slot. Deliver what you can of the talk, maybe while calling up a friend to help reboot your PC or something while you talk. Don't struggle for too long. People will respect someone who thinks on their feet and recovers their talk's message.
28. End on a high note! Never a negative one. Be positive, make them smile/laugh, inspire the audience, etc.

#### Minor Tips:

1. Save multiple versions of your talk so you can go back if you save over a copy while editing it.
2. Movies: loop them. Make them big, consider using full screen.
3. Consider using slide numbers in bottom corner, e.g. slide 5 out of 15; then you and audience know how close you are to the end.