

How to give a talk

Handout, SFB lunch meeting

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Main aspects of a talk must be considered:

1. **How the presentation looks like**
2. **How to give a successful/decent performance in your presentation**
3. **How to prepare yourself for your presentation**

1. **How the presentation looks like**

The **layout** of the slides is important and there are some rules/guidelines that should be followed.

First of all, the quantity of information per slide must be limited (the “**Less Is More**” rule). Writing 10 bullet points in a single slide will lead to a mass suicide or an epidemic sedation in the audience. If a concept is too long to fit comfortably in one slide, make two slides.

Each slide must be easy to look at, with a white or light-colored background in which every concept must be concise and easy to catch. Keep a schematic structure of your slides so that the contents are easy to spot and to read. Images should be easy to find in the slide and easy to interpret. Don't fill your slides with too many different images. It's better to have one or two images per slide which are clearly visible everywhere in the room, graph units included.

As many things in life, the devil is in the detail. **Take care of everything in your slides.** Is the title easy to spot? Is there any image which is too close to the title? Is it easy to read? Is the font size big enough to be read but small enough so that I can actually insert at least one concept inside?

One useful tool to ensure that the aspect of every slide stays consistent with the others is the **slide master** tool in PowerPoint. You can find it in “View” from the menu bar. It will show you a presentation style list in which you can choose the aspect of your title slide as well as the main slides. Every time to create a new slide it will appear following the layout that you decided. You can also apply your layout on old slides, so it is quite editing-compatible.

The **structure** of your presentation is a critical aspect for a successful take home message.

Your **outline** should definitely include a title slide with your name and affiliations (you want to be remembered, don't you?). Depending on the topic and the audience, it could help to have an

outline/introductory slide to describe the structure of your talk. **Background, results and summary slides** are of course a must in scientific talks.

Two important rules apply regarding the structure of your talk. First, avoid having a paper-based presentation. You're not there to present your paper, you're there to **present your ideas** which led to the publication of a paper. It is therefore important to avoid a flood of result slides and to limit the presentation of your results necessary to the understanding of the idea. All the remaining results can of course be presented as **supplementary slides**, ready for a show off during the question time.

Second, avoid having as last slide the classic "question slide" with acknowledgements. This will be the last slide on screen throughout the entire question time, you want it to be a summary of your talk in order to aid the audience to raise questions and to imprint the take home message in their minds.

2. How to give a successful/decent performance in your presentation

The way you talk, the way you look and the way you face the audience can be critical for a successful presentation.

Take your position according to where the audience sits, in order to involve everybody during your talk. You must **look at the audience**, not at the screen and for this reason you need to **stand** and to choose your position relatively to the screen. You need to look at the screen in order to point at some particular aspect of the slide, you don't read from it all the time. Therefore you need to **face the audience** and leave the screen at your side.

The **identity of the audience** is also important, for both contents and dress code. Usually, scientific talks are made for people in the field which can understand pretty much everything you say and couldn't care less about your dressing code. However, there could be occasions in which we will address our talks to a different kind of people, take for example a meet-the-researcher event for multiple sclerosis. In there, you will find people which are affected by multiple sclerosis and relatives who want only to know if their money was well spent. Is this occasion the level of scientific detail and the way you look could make the difference.

You need to **speak loudly** and using simple to catch keywords instead of long-sentenced concepts, in order for the audience to follow you in real time. You should **vary the pitch** of your voice, instead of a continuous monotone flow of words, which will induce wandering minds during your presentation. Insert **moments of silence** after you mention important concepts, which can also be repeated twice to stress them. These breaks will help the audience to stay awake and give them time to digest important contents. **Don't recite by heart**. You're most likely going to have a monotone and the audience will lose respect if they realize that you memorized your speech. Try to avoid up-talk. What is it? It is that interrogative inflection of the voice from many American speakers.

The **way you face your audience** is also important. Look at them directly in the eyes, trying alternatively to keep eye contact on every side of the audience. Try to keep a light smile, it will engage the audience

and you'll send an image of confidence. Moving moderately your hand is also another way to keep the attention of the audience but use with care if you don't want to look hyperactive.

Use the **pointer**, it is an important tool. Buy your own (Kensington makes a nice one), preferably with a green light instead of red which often is not strong enough to be visible. Use the pointer with caution, you're not the conductor of an orchestra, if the audience sees a green light over every sentence the pointer will become useless. With a steady hand, stress the important points only.

3. How to prepare yourself for your presentation

Most important of all aspects of a presentation is preparation. You need to practice your presentation plenty of times if you want to give a high performance.

Thus, first three rules for a successful presentation are: **practice, practice and practice**. You need to try your presentation in order to set the right pace (recommended is 100 words per minute), you cannot improvise on this and hope to find the proper speed that will allow the audience to follow you without falling asleep. Plus, often in meetings you have a time limit to respect and you don't want to be interrupted by an angry chairman. You need to know in advance how long each section of your presentation takes and you can help yourself setting some **time marks** in your notes, to check at which time you were supposed to reach that certain slide.

Of course you can practice on your own, and mainly on your own, but once or twice you should also give a **rehearsal** to a small audience to get used to it and remove in part the stress while you're presenting. Regarding this, it's a nice habit to have a "rehearse group" in order to get used to present in front of an audience. There are also communities in which members regularly meet and are willing to present any random topic, just for the sake of it. One of these communities spread worldwide and is called pecha kucha (<http://www.pechakucha.org/>), from Japanese chitchat.

Some preparation, more psychological, is also required right before the presentation. You need to prepare yourself in order to be relaxed and prepared during your presentation. First thing is to get to the seminar room before, **study the place** in order to understand where to position yourself and check that all the gear (better bring your own) is ready for use. Second, **relax**. Try to relax yourself with some **breathing technique**, like for example a series of short nose breathing cycles followed by a long inspiration-expiration cycle. **Music** is also useful, something that will put you in the right mental state, often something rich of bass sounds.

Okay, you passed through the suffering of an entire presentation alive. Now you have to face the **questions!** What do you do? One useful thing is to **repeat the question**; it will help you and the audience in understanding it. When you answer be **honest**, nobody can blame you if you don't know the answer, you can actually turn the situation in your favor praising the questioner and asking him/her if they have any suggestion. In this regard, try not to offend the questioner, even if he/her addresses the question with a harsh or aggressive tone. To help you answer, the supplementary slides are useful.

This handout was based on these sources:

- <http://pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtotalk.pdf>
- <http://time.com/3612706/presentation-advice/>
- <https://www.princeton.edu/~archss/webpdfs08/BaharMartonosi.pdf>
- <http://www.wikihow.com/Do-a-Presentation-in-Class>
- http://www.cgd.ucar.edu/cms/agu/scientific_talk.html
- <http://matt.might.net/articles/academic-presentation-tips/>
- <http://www.pechakucha.org/>