

Basic Presentation Rules

German Cubas¹

University of Houston

2016

An important part of the formation of an economist (and in general, of any modern professional worker) is the ability of effectively communicate ideas to audiences. This has been always important, but it is even more so now. The reason is that the profession has grown, and we have easy access to many publications from all over the world. But, paradoxically, access to many more publications and journals, in conjunction with our time constraints, means that we end up reading a smaller fraction of the existing literature than before! Consequently, an efficient way to get in touch with current research is by seeing the authors presenting papers in seminars and conferences. In addition, when presenting your research, and answering questions on it, you show the audience your skills as an economist and as a communicator. One of the goals of this workshop is to help the students to develop this ability. Delivering an effective and exciting presentation is tough business. In what follows I describe basic tips about effective presentations. They are based on what I learned from my mentors and other people in the profession and, more importantly, from my own bad and good experiences.

1 Preparation

1. Preparation is the first crucial step. I would say that a 1 hour presentation takes many hours of preparation. The presentation is part of the research process. Before presenting you invest time in the developing the project and that can take weeks, months or years. The challenge is to present the most important parts of that project clearly and effectively. You might think that this is just crazy, but it takes time and experience to process and show the main contribution of a paper. Whether you are presenting someone else's paper or your own research, the payoff to putting in the time to make a clear and effective presentation that the audience understands and can give feedback on is extremely high.

2 Slides

1. These days, 99% of the profession uses the software Beamer to prepare the slides, which is a software that uses Latex as platform. If you haven't used this software, this is the right time to start investing the time to learn it. I (and some of my colleagues) can give you some of my past presentations to use them as examples.

¹With input from Kei-Mu Yi

2. Writing slides is not like writing a paper. In particular, there are things in the paper that you do not show in the slides (and vice versa). Below are some basic rules when writing slides:

- (a) Taken as a whole, the slides should not contain too many items (either equations or words) as people do not have time to read them all. Recall that you should talk, so words on the slide are not a substitute of your speech. For instance, you should only include the main equations and derivations, and only if you are going to explain them step-by-step.
- (b) Each slide should address only one point or message of the paper.
- (c) Everything has to be crystal clear and legible, preferably with large letters and simple layout.
- (d) It is not good to read the slides when presenting. However, there are exceptions, because there will be some times where you may want to read the slide to make a particular point, etc.
- (e) When a slide contains a figure or a table, everything should be readable and neat. Please do not include a wall of numbers; you should only include a number that you will talk about. Please explain what you learned or want the audience to learn from the figure or table. In addition, for each graph, you need to tell the audience what the x-axis and y-axis stand for, the units, etc.
- (f) If you include regression results, focus on the economics, not the statistics, unless somebody asks about that. This means focusing on the economic significance of the coefficient estimates.
- (g) Typos are bad, they could be interpreted as a signal of not being sufficiently careful in the actual research.
- (h) It is very important to stay within the time frame you are given, and you must factor in questions and/or comments from the audience. You have to think hard about the number of slides of your presentation. It takes approximately 3 minutes per slide; it is useful to be conservative on your time estimates, because it is always bad to go overtime or to rush at the end of the presentation (before concluding). You can always prepare extra slides containing extra results or add buttons in the slides, so you can go to the extra slides in case the audience demands that.
- (i) Sometimes there are people in the audience that annoy you in the middle of the talk with questions (sometimes not important ones). Without being dismissive, you can always ask the person or persons to talk about the point after the seminar, so that you can continue.
- (j) If somebody says something negative about the paper, that's normal and fine. It is always OK to recognize that (all papers have problems and all models are wrong), and to indicate that you will try to improve the methodology, data, model, etc.. At the same time, it is also useful to reiterate the positive features of your research. You want to try to end on a positive note by stressing that while it is not perfect, your paper is useful.
- (k) Do not waste your precious time by comparing the paper with the literature. You can add a slide with a list of papers, but what is better is to get across the precise contribution of the paper. You can have a button to an extra slide containing the list of papers in case somebody in the audience asks. This does not mean you should not know the literature; on the contrary, you need to, because people will ask questions about that.

3 Content

1. A very important aspect of the presentation is to capture the attention of the audience from the very beginning. For this reason, the first few slides are crucial. They should include a very good introduction of the topic of your paper, as well as its motivation. You need to recognize that what may be interesting to you it is not necessarily exciting for others. However, even though some part of the audience will be from fields other than yours, they are all economists and they love the discipline. So, it is your job to make them feel excited about your work. That said, I recommend you prepare no more than 6 slides (including the literature) in the introduction, so that you can go to your actual work as soon as possible. Therefore, when preparing the Intro ask yourself a set of questions, like:
 - (a) What is the main research question of the paper and why is it interesting? In other words, why should we care about it?
 - (b) What do you do and what is your main result (if it is quantitative please put numbers)? But, please just tell the audience the main results without any sequence of events.
 - (c) When discussing how your paper fits into the literature you should ask yourself: What type of tools does the discipline use to answer the question? What are the answers to that question; do they make sense to you and/or are they controversial? What are the limitations of the literature, or the tools the literature uses? How do you improve on these limitations with your paper? What are the limitations of your approach and what are the future avenues to add further to this research? Do not hide weaknesses, that could be a disaster. You should have a prior that the audience is smart and also your ally. You want them to leave the room with the idea that they can write a paragraph of your paper right away.
 - (d) Sometimes, you will get a lot of questions in the introduction. That is good, overall, because it means the audience is interested. On the other hand, you do not want to delay for too long moving forward to main part of your talk. So, at some point, you simply have to tell the audience where you are going and what are the main results. I like to state an outline of the talk right after the Intro and then tell the audience where you are as you progress. Transitions are key, and this helps you keep moving forward.

4 Delivering

1. When talking please do it slowly, do not mumble – rather, enunciate well and look at the audience. In addition, move your hands and do not put them in your pockets. Try to move around in the room (not too much though) and step firmly to show confidence. Try to answer all the audience' questions politely and *precisely*. Do not be dismissive; if you do not know something or haven't thought about it, just say it.
2. It is key to practice your presentation many times before delivering it. I suggest you to ask your family and your classmates to listen to your presentations. The more you practice the better will be your presentation, and the more confident you will feel.