20 TIPS FOR GIVING A RESEARCH PRESENTATION

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Oral presentations of research have (unfortunately but sometimes deservedly) a reputation for being rather dull. Here are 20 tips to keep your audience interested. Some of these points assume you are using PowerPoint or similar but of course this is not a requirement.

1. **Think about your audience not just your content.**

    Put yourself in the position of the audience and imagine how they will be feeling during your presentation. You will have been in their position many times – think about presentations where you felt engaged and ones where you struggled to stay attentive. What was it about those presentations that made them more or less interesting? Awareness of audience is a major factor in the success of any oral presentation.

    Think about what your audience already know and pitch your presentation accordingly.

    Remember too that your audience may have been listening to presentations all day. So whether you are presenting first or last does make a difference to how much energy the audience will have and as a general rule presentations towards the end of the day need to be easier for audiences to engage with than those which take place when they are still fresh.

    At a recent conference a distinguished international expert in ELT gave the final plenary. It was Saturday afternoon. The talk was informative, but after 50 slides and 60 minutes of scholarly input I doubt many people in the audience were still switched on. The speaker had focused all their attention on their input and not taken the needs of the audience into account. Even expert researchers make this basic mistake when it comes to oral presentations.

2. **Avoid going into too much detail – less is often more.**

    You often have 20-30 minutes to talk about a project you spent months doing and it is not possible (nor desirable) to cover all aspects of the research. You must therefore be selective. For example, if there are aspects of your methodology that were particularly interesting then your talk can have a methodological focus. Or (more commonly) the focus will be substantive – on the findings. If the focus is on the findings, you will deal with the methodology of the study briefly.

3. **Do not provide a literature review orally.**

    This is a specific example of Point 2. Some general comments on the theoretical background will suffice but an oral presentation is not a suitable way of reviewing the literature. If you think the audience would find it interesting to follow up some references, put these on a handout and give them out. But the audience will not normally have come to listen to you because they want to hear a literature review.

4. **Distribute your time according to your priorities.**

    Following on from Point 2, in planning your talk you should decide how much time you will dedicate to each issue you cover. For example, in a 30 minute talk where the focus is on the findings, you might spend at most five minutes on the background to the study

and the methodology, 15 on the findings, five on the implications and five for questions.

5.   Do not read from a script.

An oral presentation is not a written script that is read out. Audiences respond well to a speaker who communicates with them. Reading from a script means your attention is not on the audience. Your slides can act as prompts to help you remember what to say next or you may have prompt cards. But avoid reading from notes – or even reading out long stretches of text from your slides.

6.   Presentation software facilitates – not delivers - the talk.

Speakers often invest so much time in preparing their slides that they forget that the slides are there to support the speaker - not to make the speaker redundant. Wonderful slides, then, do not guarantee an effective oral presentation. What the speaker does and says is more important.

7.   Limit the amount of text on each slide.

You will know from being in the audience that slides which are over-loaded with information are not helpful, especially when the speaker moves to the next slide before everyone has had time to read the previous one. Generally, keep the text on a slide to a minimum – a few bullets, an interesting quotation, a visual of some kind.

8.   Limit the total number of slides

You may have heard the expression 'death by PowerPoint'. This is the feeling the audience experience when a talk has too many slides, with the consequence that the speaker is flying through them without any time for the audience to take them in. I would suggest no more than 15 slides in a 30 minute presentation. Limiting the number of slides also forces the speaker to be selective in what they cover during the talk (see Point 2).

9.   Make sure your slides are legible.

Audiences get frustrated when they are shown slides that they cannot read because the font is too small (this is a common problem when speakers put tables with numbers onto a slide). I regularly see speakers put up slides that cannot be read then apologize by saying 'I know you can't read this, but ….'. Keep your font big – I normally use 36 for titles and 32 for text.

10.   Keep special effects to a minimum.

Presentation software gives us many special effects to play with (e.g. spinning text, sounds). Unless there is a good reason for using these (i.e. unless they add to your presentation in some meaningful way), avoid them. Most audiences find them distracting and gimmicky (they used to be a novelty but not anymore). The same applies to your choice of font – avoid anything too fancy or stylized (and use a consistent font and colour scheme throughout). You want the audience's attention to be on you, not on the special effects in your slides.

11.   Respect the time limit.

You will know in advance what your time limit is, so there is no excuse for running out of time. Part of your preparation is to check that the material you have included can be covered (without going too fast) in the time available. Do not start a presentation by saying 'I've got too much to cover in the time available so I'll need to go fast' and don't

end by saying 'I'm running out of time so I'm going to skip the next five slides'. The audience will not be sympathetic because time problems suggest you have not prepared well. On the other hand, don't finish after 15 minutes of a 30 minute session; finishing a few minutes early is good, but not too early.

12.   Make sure you deal with the 'so what' question.

Speakers often focus so keenly on their research findings that they forget the bigger picture. It is important though to address the 'so what' question – i.e. what are the broader implications of your study and how are your results of relevance to an audience who teach in a different context (even within the same institution). When you are preparing your talk, imagine someone asking you about the broader relevance or value of your research – what would you say? Include a comment on that issue towards the end of your presentation.

13.   Rehearse and get feedback on the clarity, coherence and timing of your talk.

The value of rehearsing cannot be over-emphasized. You can rehearse alone or, even better, find a couple of colleagues and ask them to be your audience. It is only when we do a full rehearsal that we realize, for example, that we have too much material, that the sequence of the material is not logical, or that particular explanations are not very clear.

14.   Speak at a slower rate than you normally would.

The excitement of a presentation often, unknowingly, makes us speak too fast. It helps then if we can monitor our own speech during a presentation and make it a bit slower than it normally would be. We may feel we are speaking too slowly but the audience will appreciate a more measured delivery rather than a breathless speech which leaves them exhausted and confused.

15.   Find out in advance what the policy on questions is.

In some presentations speakers are required to allocate five minutes of their time to questions. This is included in your total time and in such cases you must protect that time rather than filling it with your talk. So if you have a 30 minute slot and five minutes are allocated for questions, you need to plan your presentation so that you are finished in 25 minutes. The audience will not be happy if the expected time for questions either does not happen or spills over into the break.

16.   Plan your introduction.

An audience forms an opinion about a speaker within the first minute. A strong start can make a huge difference to how engaged the audience will be. In contrast, an uncertain introduction does little to inspire confidence in what follows. An important part of planning, then, is to know exactly what you are going to say at the start. A confident start will also give you confidence for the rest of the talk.

17.   Plan your conclusion.

Your conclusion is the last thing the audience will hear and it is important that they leave with a clear sense of the main points you want them to take away. So allow time in your presentation to review the key points and also know exactly how you are going to conclude. Avoid: finishing without anyone in the audience realizing; standing there in silence because you have nothing more to say; putting up a slide which says 'The End'. Plan the final few sentences so that it is clear to the audience that you are wrapping up.

18.   Make sure the presentation has a logical structure to it.

The logic of a presentation is often obvious to the speaker, but unless it is also obvious to the audience they will struggle to follow. Make sure then that your key points follow a clear structure and that you signal this structure to the audience as necessary to facilitate their understanding.

19.   Check out the room and equipment in advance.

If possible, find out which room you will be in and about the facilities available. Don't assume a computer, projector and PowerPoint, or an internet connection, will be available. Double-check by asking the organizer. Check the room to see how big the projection screen is and how close the audience will be – if you are using PowerPoint you may need to adjust the size of your font accordingly.

20.   Make the experience an enjoyable one – for you and the audience.

The success of an oral presentation lies mainly in how the audience feel at the end of it – covering plenty of material or running through several beautifully-designed slides is rather meaningless if the audience are left feeling dissatisfied. Keeping the audience in mind at all times when we plan and deliver an oral presentation is thus perhaps the single most important factor in determining how effective we are.

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