Preparing Effective Presentations

These tips apply regardless of whether the time for the presentations is short (less than 30 minutes) or long. Complaints about poor presentations have been received for decades and continue to be received. Effective presentations make learning and technical advances more likely. They also enhance the perception of the presenter in the eyes of the professional community. Boring, ineffective presentations are not paid much attention.

Organize content

- Make sure the audience walks away understanding the five things any listener to a presentation really cares about:
    1. What is the problem and why?
    2. What has been done about it?
    3. What is the presenter doing (or having done) about it?
    4. What additional value does the presenter's approach provide?
    5. Where do we go from here?
- Carefully budget your time, especially for short (e.g., 15 minute) presentations.
- Allow time to describe the problem clearly enough for the audience to appreciate the value of your contribution. This usually will take more than 30 seconds.
- Leave enough time to present your own contribution clearly. This will rarely require all of the allotted time.
- Put your material in a context that the audience can relate to. It's a good idea to aim your presentation to an audience of colleagues who are not familiar with your research area. Your objective is to communicate an appreciation of the importance of your work, not just to lay out the results.
- Give references and a way to contact you so those interested in the theoretical details can follow up.

Prepare effective displays

Here are some suggestions that will make your displays more effective:

- Keep it simple. The fact that you can include all kinds of cute decorations, artistic effects, and logos does not mean that you should. Fancy designs or color shifts can make the important material hard to read. Less is more.

- Use at least a 24-point font so everyone in the room can read your material. Unreadable material is worse than useless—it inspires a negative attitude among the audience to your work and, ultimately, to you. NEVER use a photocopy of a standard printed page as a display— it is difficult to overstate how annoying this is to an audience.
- Try to limit the material to eight lines per slide, and keep the number of words to a minimum. Summarize the main points—don't include every detail of what you plan to say. Keep it simple.
- Limit the tables to four rows or columns for readability. Sacrifice content for legibility— unreadable content is worse than useless. Many large tables can be displayed more effectively as a graph than as a table.
- Don't put a lot of curves on a graphical display— busy graphical displays are hard to read. Also, label your graphs clearly with BIG, READABLE TYPE.
- Dark letters on light (or transparent) backgrounds work well for overheads. Light letters (yellow or white) on a dark background (e.g., dark blue) often will be easier to read when the material is displayed using slides or LCD (data) projectors.
- Use equations sparingly, if at all—audience members not working in the research area can find them difficult to follow as part of a rapidly delivered presentation. Avoid derivations and concentrate on presenting what your results mean. The audience will concede the proof and those who really are interested can follow up with you, which they're more likely to do if they understand your presentation.
- Don't fill up the transparency or slide— the peripheral material may not make it onto the display screen—especially the material on the bottom of a portrait-oriented transparency.
- Identify the journal when you give references: Smith, Bcs96 clues the reader that the article is in a 1996 issue of Biometrics, which is much more useful than just Smith 1996.
- Finally— and this is critical, always—always, always preview your slides. You will look foolish if symbols and Greek letters that looked OK in a WORD document didn't translate into anything readable in POWERPOINT— and it happens!

Time your talk

Don't deliver a 30-minute talk in 15 minutes. Nothing irritates an audience more than a rushed presentation. Your objective is to engage the audience and have them understand your message. Don't flood them with more than they can absorb. Think in terms of what it would take if you were giving (or, better, listening to) the last paper in the last contributed paper session of the last day. This means:

- Present only as much material as can reasonably fit into the time period allotted. Generally, that means one slide or overhead per minute, or less.
- Talk at a pace that everybody in the audience can understand. Speak slowly, clearly, and loudly, especially if your English is heavily accented.
- PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE. Ask a colleague to judge your presentation, delivery, clarity of language, and use of time.
- Balance the amount of material you present with a reasonable pace of presentation. If you feel rushed when you practice, then you have too much material. Budget your time to take a minute or two less than your maximum allotment. Again, less is more.

Section 508 tips

Section 508 of the amended Rehabilitation Act was enacted to eliminate barriers that might interfere with the ability of individuals with disabilities to fully access Web-delivered information and fully utilize Web-based tools and services. Section 508 requirements apply to all federal Web sites, including all forms of information and posted content, as well as any associated application using Web and media.

As a trusted provider of communications, NCHS is committed to making sure its information and data are available to people with disabilities in ways that are comparable with the availability enjoyed by people without disabilities.

- Use recommended fonts such as: Times New Roman, Verdana, Arial, Tahoma, and Helvetica. Do not use italic.
- Don't use text boxes, always use the slide layout.
- Avoid using flickering/flashing text and/or animated text.
- Be sure that all text appears in the outline view text in a text box will not appear in the outline view.
- Create title using a title holder, not text box.
- Use applications slides to create for graphics and images, and apply alternate text (alt text).
- All slides that contain multiple images on the same page must be grouped as one object (e.g., boxes in an organizational chart), and alt text must be added.
- Apply alternate text to charts and graphs; they are not accessible without alt text.
- Tables should be created within PowerPoint. Column headers should be in the first row. Row headers should be in the first column. Tabulated data should not be displayed using tabs and spacing.
- Apply descriptive text immediately after complex images.
- All track changes must be accepted or rejected and turned off.

- Be sure to use correct hyperlinks (URLs) and display the fully qualified URL (i.e. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs and not www.cdc.gov/nchs).
- Use Section 508 resources
    - Accessible PowerPoint Conference Template
    - HHS.gov - Testing Documents for Section 508 Compliance

Loose ends

- Prepare a handout. If you use a computer to prepare your visual displays, you can get a handout with several slides or pages on a single physical page for essentially no extra effort using available software.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE the presentation, with attention to content, delivery, and use of time.

Adapted from Joint Statistical Meeting Participation Guidelines.