

## MEMBERS AREA HINT SHEET

### What makes a good technical presentation? Part I: Structuring your presentation



Presenting your research paper at an international conference is a great opportunity for others from around the world to hear about your work, and can provide excellent opportunities for collaborating with other research teams. It can also be a nerve-racking experience, whether you are a non-native English speaker or not.

Here in Part I of our four-part series of presentation hint sheets, we'll discuss how to prepare an effective presentation by focusing on the structure of your presentation; we'll talk mainly about oral presentations below, but many of the hints

can be applied to poster presentations too. In later hints sheets we'll discuss how to make effective visual materials, how to present your paper to the audience in an impressive, professional manner, and how to handle Q&A sessions. Whether you've given a presentation before and simply want to refine your presentation skills, or whether you want to prepare for your first-ever presentation in English, we hope you'll find our hints helpful.

#### So where do we start?

Well, first let's briefly recap on what the purpose of your presentation is. You are giving your presentation not only to communicate your rationale and findings clearly to the audience but also to convince them that what you are saying is true and relevant to your specialist field—and you should do this in an interesting manner that encourages your audience to want to learn more about your research...

This sounds simple enough, but at some time we've probably all seen presentations that don't successfully meet this purpose... Sometimes the reason is that the speaker is nervous; other times it is because the speaker is ill-prepared or that the presentation is not well structured orally or visually, which leaves the audience with a lot of hard work to do to understand the science. As the presenter, you must keep the audience interested and listening, especially during a long day of many presentations.

If you think carefully about how to structure your presentation, you will be making the first steps towards creating an effective presentation.

## And now some tips on how to write an effective oral presentation...

- 1 Before you begin writing, consider two very important questions: who will your audience be and how much time is available for you to give your presentation?

First, who will your audience be and why will they be interested in your work?

Will they be a more general audience from a diverse range of fields who could be confused by advanced theory and technical terminology, or will they be mainly from your own specialized field sharing a lot of your highly specific knowledge?

Will it be a large or small audience? This may affect whether they will be a more interactive audience or not. What are the most important aspects you need to communicate to your audience? How can you do this convincingly? What would be the most logical way for your audience to understand your work in just a very short time? The answers to all these general questions should help to set the tone for your presentation.

Second, how much time is available for you to speak?

Are you able to give a long presentation that will allow you to go into detail, or do you only have time for a short presentation, which means you need to concentrate on a few main points?

Is Q&A included in the time allotted or is it an additional part of your presentation?

It is often a good idea to write a presentation that covers about 80% of the time allotted. Try to determine this length by practicing your entire presentation and not just by reading your script aloud, as reading takes less time than presenting.

- 2 Begin by preparing the key points you want to raise.  
What makes your work different from that of others? What is new and exciting about your work? Use these points to prepare a strong introduction that gets the audience's attention. Some good ways to make a strong introduction is to pose an interesting research question (which you will answer/address later in your presentation) or use a relevant quote or story to set the scene. Then state your topic and briefly introduce the points that you will cover in your presentation. The audience now has a taster of what is coming...

- 3 Using the information you prepared in step 2, try to summarize the content of your presentation in two or three well-constructed sentences. This can help you in the following ways:
  - To structure your presentation to cover only the main points in the time allotted, which will be the main points the audience remembers after your talk
  - To re-state the importance of your work during the conclusion or Q&A session
  - To outline your research in a highly professional manner to conference participants **outside** of your presentation time

- 4 The body of the presentation must be logical and make sense quickly. Decide the most effective order of your presentation. Will it be organized chronologically, explain a cause-effect relation, or present a problem and solution?  
Throughout the presentation, keep to the order you chose to avoid confusing the audience.

- 5 Use short sentences with simple constructions to explain your concepts clearly. Sentence structure should be similar to conversational speech, although still formal in style. Don't use a formal written style when giving a presentation. Remember that your audience is mainly listening to your presentation and not reading, so they need to understand easily what you are saying.
- 6 Make sure you use connectives (e.g., therefore, because, next) to help the audience understand the logical sequence of your work and to follow the progression of your thoughts smoothly. Present your research as a progressing "story" to keep them interested.
- 7 Back up your points with strong evidence. This will convince the audience to support your point of view. Avoid ambiguous and general statements, as these can create the impression that you don't know all the facts or that you are trying to hide limitations of your research, etc. Strong evidence will earn you credibility as an expert speaker.
- 8 Prepare a strong conclusion. Your conclusion will leave a final impression about your work with the audience, so prepare this part of your talk well. Present it concisely on a slide and deliver it with confidence. Your conclusion should reflect the key sentences you created in step 3. Also indicate clearly when you are about to end your presentation, for example, using a phrase such as "To conclude". This phrase alerts the audience to your main points again. Be sure to state any limitations of your work so you maintain credibility with the audience.
- 9 When structuring your presentation, make sketches of your slides to go with your talk. Make sure your slides are clean, simple and important to the audience's understanding of your work. Don't include a lot of information. Less information is definitely better. If your slides are too busy, cut out some of the information: this can also help you spot non-important information you can remove from your talk. If it becomes absolutely essential to give details, consider supplementing your presentation with a handout instead of presenting these details during the talk.
- 10 When you have finished drafting the text for your talk, practice the speech aloud as if you were pointing to your slides. Try to get as close to 80% of the allotted time as possible.
- 11 And for some final tips...  
You will be standing in front of a professional audience, so you want to make the very best impression. Have your presentation edited by a native speaker familiar with your field of study. The editor will make sure the style of your speech is appropriate and flows smoothly as well as help you prepare slides that enhance your talk and help the audience remember your key points. If you wish, you can also ask your editor to create an audio recording of your talk so you can practice pronunciation, intonation and fluency before your talk.

As you can see, taking the time to prepare the structure of your talk is the first step towards giving an effective presentation. In later hint sheets, we'll continue to discuss how to make the other aspects of your presentation successful.

We hope that this hint sheet on structuring an effective presentation has been helpful.