

EPIC

Presenting a Paper

1. Concentrate on getting a few simple points across

You only have a limited time, and you should realise that it is impossible to get everything across. It makes sense, therefore, to reduce your presentation to a limited number of points, which are all directly relevant to the question and topic of your presentation and your overall argument (see pt. 8) and which are summed up as bullet-points in the conclusion.

2. Avoid too much detail

Do not overload the presentation with details. Many details can be summarised in one or two snappy sentences, and that should do. Additional detail can always be given during the discussion afterwards and/or find its way into the handouts.

3. Encourage discussion

It is important to remember the function of your presentation. The main purpose of your presentation is to encourage discussion, which then becomes a vehicle for developing a collective understanding of the questions and the topics among the students. It is not meant to give a summary statement on the topic. One way to do that is to make a clear argument in the presentation, another is to actively engage what others might think about the question you answer, or you might want to argue why particular positions do not make sense. Discussion is always helped by clear and transparent arguments and statements.

4. Consider using overheads to present data

Overheads are a useful way of helping you with your talk. They can serve two functions. If you speak from notes (but do not read out aloud), you may use the overheads as nudges for yourself. They will allow you to walk around while talking. The other purpose is to use them to present data. Overheads with graphs or tables help us see what you mean without you going into detail yourself. If using a table, mark clearly the figure(s) you want the listeners to concentrate on. Text in overheads should be so large that everyone can read them (at least 24 pt). By implication, limit the text to bullet points with a few words. Powerpoint is nice, but too much animation can be distracting, so avoid animation overload.

5. Reading versus speaking from notes

The best way to give a talk is speaking from notes. It is more natural, and you can modulate your talk to the audience. However, it requires that you are confident about speaking in public and that you know your subject matter sufficiently well to be able to do so.

Reading a text is OK as an alternative solution, but then try and write (and read out) spoken English, i.e. with interjections that talk to the audience, the use of "you" in active sentences, etc. Never forget to speak slowly, limit your text to a few points (see point 1) and concentrate at least as much on form as on contents (see point 2).

6. Keeping the attention of the audience

A few simple tricks to keep the attention of the audience without doing anything silly:

- look many of them in the eyes (rather than looking only at one person, or looking up at the ceiling or some indeterminate point behind them);
- walking around (especially if the group is sitting in a U-formed table or a circle) and acting as if you are talking to some members of the audience individually helps to make them feel involved and increases their ability and willingness to come along with you;
- a small sarcastic remark or a joke always helps to break the tenseness of long sessions.

7. Handouts

Handouts are generally a good idea. They are especially effective if they provide data and graphs, since they add to what you have to say, and if the data are good, then someone can reconstruct large parts of your argument simply by looking at them. For more "qualitative" talks, handouts with the main points are useful, since they allow for a reconstruction as well. However, make sure that the hand-out does not deflect attention from your talk (it might better to give a handout after the talk). Importantly, remember that handouts are often used as a source of reference during exam revisions, and that others therefore rely on them.

8. Think about the structure of the presentation

The best way is to start by posing the question that organises your talk clearly upfront, then say how you will answer it and why (in one sentence), and then answer it, fleshing out what is necessary along the way. Your answer and the material you give to support it should be limited to that only, made clearly and persuasively, and with only the detail that is necessary to make your point (the rest can follow in the discussion).