Conference Oral Presentations

Guidelines and Resources

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Summary

We provide some guidelines on preparing an oral presentation for a conference, mainly to help you prepare for the ICTA Spring Symposium 2018, but also as a general guide for presenting at other conferences. We outline some general tips, but there is lots of useful advice out there, so we recommend doing plenty of background reading to get a clearer picture, not of *how* you should do a presentation, but of *what you're trying to achieve with your presentation*. We provide a short list of reading resources to get you started.

Top tips for preparing an Oral Presentation

1. *Message*: As for conference abstracts and any scientific communication, the general advice is to run your idea past someone before you start preparing any slides. So, find a colleague who's not too familiar with your work but who will be honest with you, invite him/her for coffee/tea, and explain your idea for the presentation. Then ask your colleague to repeat it back to you. This quick exercise will be a good chance to hear how your argument sounds out loud, which parts of your story are clear, and how you should pitch it to someone who's not an expert in your research topic. If you're lucky, your colleague will come up with an even better angle for explaining your research than you! Even if you did this exercise when preparing your abstract, it is worth doing it again, as your research may have advanced since then.
2. *Audience*: Speaking of pitching your scientific story, the success of your presentation will depend on whether or not you can capture and retain the audience's attention. To achieve this:
    a. Find out as much as you can about who the audience is likely to be (web search, ask colleagues, or guess) and adapt the content as much as possible to the audience (e.g. background, jargon, etc.)
    b. Capture their interest fast - start with a common value/interest/problem that your research addresses and that most audience members could relate to (e.g. an important societal issue, a common scientific challenge in your field).
    c. Do not assume too much of their knowledge - you're more likely to lose people because your talk is too detailed/specific than to offend them because it's too basic. Your audience may be experts, but most are unlikely to be very familiar with your specific research question.
3. *Story*: Do not to give a comprehensive summary of all your work. Choose one interesting angle/story and focus your presentation on communicating that particular part. This angle/story should address the common value/interest/problem you presented at the beginning.

4. *Preparation - slide design*: Here are 5 design principles from David JP Phillips on how to avoid Death by Powerpoint (but we recommend doing some research for tips that resonate best with you)
   a. One message per slide: You can only make one point at a time and your audience can only hear/read/understand one point at a time. Having one point per slide helps to synchronise the speaker, the slideshow, and the audience.
   b. Don't write sentences: People can't listen to you and read at the same time. If you must write a sentence - don't talk until you have given people time to read it.
   c. Size matters: People focus on big things first, so make the most important elements the biggest.
   d. Use contrast to direct attention: The audience will be drawn to the elements with the highest contrast (e.g., text, images) - use dark backgrounds and light text, and dim anything you're not currently talking about.
   e. Six objects per slide: The number of objects per slide is what counts to make the message clear - the maximum should be SIX.
5. *Preparation - oral delivery*:
   a. Practice, practice, practice: Practice makes perfect, so do not be afraid to practice as many times as needed. The real practice should be with the final presentation, out loud, and without interruptions. If you exceed the assigned time, cut some text and practice again.
   b. Be confident: You're probably nervous, which just means that you're taking the talk seriously, not that you don't know what you're talking about. The audience has come to listen to you, so relax and enjoy telling them about your work.
   c. Take your time: Nerves often make people speak too quickly, which will make it difficult for the audience to follow you. So, slow down to help them relax and enjoy your talk.
   d. Stand tall and speak up: Again, nerves often cause us to make ourselves small and quiet - stand tall to show confidence, and speak up to make sure everyone can hear you.
   e. Talk to the audience, not to the screen: You are your presentation, not the slides. To draw the audience into your presentation, face them, make eye-contact and smile.
   f. Stick to your time-frame: The audience's time is just as important as yours. Respect them and other speakers by keeping to time, including questions.
6. Go back to your colleague and ask him/her to listen to your presentation and give you feedback on the story, slides and delivery.

Further reading and resources

1. The magical science of storytelling | David JP Phillips
2. PowerPoint should be banned. This PowerPoint presentation explains why.
3. 5 Principles For Making PowerPoint Slides With Impact
4. How to give a dynamic scientific presentation
5. Scientific presentations: A cheat sheet
6. Tips for giving a successful scientific presentation
7. How to give a scientific presentation
8. The Craft of Scientific Presentations
9. How to avoid death By PowerPoint