RNSH SERT Institute
Surgical | Education | Research | Training

GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

5.2 Slide Presentations to Conferences

A conference oral presentation is quite a different beast to an invited seminar, where a presenter holds forth on their subject of expertise for half an hour or more. It is usually chosen from among the best ranked abstracts and involves presenting a piece of research work in 5 to 15 minutes, depending on the session. The shorter the presentation the more preparation needed; it is far harder to prepare than a long seminar as studies always contain complexities not easy to describe in a brief way and there may be several important study stages to describe. They are therefore information dense, so must be highly structured with easily grasped slides and clear wording that is well-honed beforehand to ensure a good and confident flow.

When preparing, remember how often you suffered listening to presentations that were boring with rapid-fire speech and slides that were impossible to read. Resolve to do better.

General principles
The first principle is that to know your audience and their level of understanding, and treat them with courtesy and respect. No matter how clever individuals in the audience may be, you are trying to communicate rapidly a lot of complex information. Therefore, you need to make it mentally easy for the audience to follow: use unrushed speech patterns, theme repetition, consistent colouring schemes and uncluttered slides. Remember how fleeting your words and slides are to them, unlike printed text and images where a reader can linger or revisit difficult points, so prepare the talk with this in mind.

Title slide
This is useful to include at the start but the chairperson will usually state the title and authors so the presenter can just move on from the title slide without further comment.

The first sentence
It is crucial to get the first sentence right, so pick a short sentence easy to say (and remember), so after that everything should go well. Ideally, it is engaging enough to grab the attention of the audience.

Introduce the work
Concisely summarise the subject and outline the research question and why it is important. You may also want to include formal hypotheses, but it depends on the presentation.

Speak ... very ... slowly
To present well you should not speak fast, which makes a talk hard to follow. It also sounds nervous. Speeding up unconsciously as a talk goes on is common, so it is useful to pause at important slides, pause and start again slowly. A slow, measured pace sounds nice and confident, speeding up for less important points and slowing down to emphasis. It may feel like talking to a slightly dim child but, surprisingly, it will not seem that way to the audience. Speak into the microphone (which is harder than it sounds) and project ENTHUSIASM!!! Or fake enthusiasm, your choice, but it helps the audience to keep engaged with your work.

Laser pointers and presentation equipment
Use laser pointers very sparingly and do not wave it around. Familiarise yourself with slide control and laser pointer beforehand, and check slides with animation or movies run on the conference system.

Slide qualities

Do not use too many slides - an average of 40 seconds per slide is often a good guide. Graphs, tables and images must be easy to read quickly, with large (>16 point) bold fonts and short labels. Titles should be short and informative. Use fly-ins to help emphasise points, but most other animations distract. Blocks of text are best not to go beyond 2 lines or they will be hard to follow. Do not overburden the slide with information and omit irrelevant features that will add to visual confusion. For example, do not put many literature references in as they clutter and, while their help to give credibility to a point they are not easy for audience members to look up.

When speaking over slide text do not simply read the text out in a droning manner, but slightly paraphrase in a conversational way. Use colour schemes to help comprehension so, for example, if controls are green on one slide make them green on others. **The audience has a brief time to take in a lot** – make it easy for them.

Graphs

It is best to step an audience through the graph from left to right and explain major features as you go. Make x-axis categories match later slides (where relevant), so are quicker to grasp.

Summaries and conclusions

At the end of a talk, run through a text or diagrammatic summary which reflects the content of the talk but keep it short. Conclusions should be exactly that, and not just repeating a summary; be clear how it relates to the evidence presented in the talk.

Acknowledgements slide

Always include one of these. It will mention funding and other support and collaborators, but (unlike seminars) thanking your co-authors is unnecessary as, implicitly, you are speaking on their behalf.

Practice

After working out the words and slide content, practice many, many times. If you do this you will remember your words as you present and it will flow nicely, but it is usually not best to memorise a script as it is hard to pick up the thread again if you stall. Use notes as a backup and to provide reassurance in case you dry up. When practicing, note the places where you stall, and alter the slide or the phrasing to prevent stalling on the day.

Questions

Take this seriously, and get people to pitch hard and soft practice questions to you to gauge your response. Prepare for defending particular flaws that you know exist in the talk, but remember many questions will be simpler than you imagine and some will be completely unexpected. If you are a student it may be reasonable for your supervisor (if present) to step in to deal with a tricky question or one that needs a lot of background knowledge. If you do not know the answer to a question you should say so (don't just wing it), but try and provide a little more comment than simply "I don't know".

Fear and stage fright

This is unavoidable if you are inexperienced, but having lots of practice helps inspire some confidence. Beyond that it must simply be endured, and be consoled that it will get easier with time. However, it is important to be aware that the audience almost certainly knows much less about the topic than you do. If the rows of faces seem intimidating, focus only on one or two people in the audience can help. Some say it helps to imagine the audience with funny hats or something else distracting, which is highly questionable, but use whatever you find is helpful.

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