

GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

5.3 Giving Presentations and Lectures-

General Considerations

It is a normal and expected skill for a surgeon or clinician to be able to give an extended presentation at a conference or seminar. While presenters usually take considerable care to prepare their talk, it is a common experience that many conference presentations are hard to understand and lack clarity. Thus, a talk that is well presented and clear can really stand out and have impact. Good lecturing is a skill that needs continual nurturing, but bear in mind it is rare for anyone to do it brilliantly all the time.

It is not simple to pin down why a particular presentation is hard for an audience to understand, since many elements need to work together. However, common culprits are slide complexity, unintelligibility of the talk structure or narrative, lack of speaking clarity and too much knowledge assumed of the poor audience.

It is useful to recall that a lecture or speech is linear: there is an utterance and a slide projected and pointed at, then they are gone. However, information is usually not linear. Unfortunately, the audience cannot easily go back and check something like they can a written text, so must struggle on. For these reasons lecturers need to employ devices that make things easier for the audience. One device is simply the use of a familiar lecture structures. Here, the audience is introduced to information in an accustomed sequence that is easily grasped, with the importance of particular elements made evident.

It helps to repeat important points. Focussing on a small number of key points (usually three) is common and usually effective. Clear diction is needed, and as much rhetorical skill as can be mustered. It helps to repeat important points. At the end, a short and crisp summary of the take-home messages is given, and further clarifications given during question time. These approaches taken together are a well attested way to optimise the imparting of information to an audience. Also, it helps to repeat important points.

You

Dress as convention dictates so you are not a visual distraction. Also:

- Speak in measured and modulated tones, not monotone
- Don't say 'um' more than a few times.
- Speak unnaturally slowly, speeding up at times, perhaps where the material is simple.
- Smile as much as is possible without actually scaring anyone.
- Above all, sound interested and enthusiastic about your material. A bit of enthusiasm makes a surprising difference, and holds attention.

The attention of the audience should be between the slides and the speaker. Use the slides to present your concise points and your voice to elaborate.

Practice, and the surprising difference between the written and spoken word

The above considerations mean that a talk needs to be practiced a lot, and feedback obtained from others. This practice needs to be repeated until everything is recalled easily and sounds confident.

If there is no-one to help then record yourself and play it back - much will be revealed. When stringing sentences together it can be surprising how a sentence or phrase appears fine on the page but sounds terrible and stilted when utter aloud. In most cases it is just that written convention may not match natural speech patterns well. Because of

this be very wary of giving a talk without practicing it out loud at least once.

Slide clarity

Slides have two functions –as a visual aid and to present specific data. It may be hard to get sound advice on how to make good slides, except directly from an experienced mentor, but there are some easy points to remember.

- Slides need big font size to be read easily from a distance.
- Slide should look visually uncluttered.
- Information content should not be too dense as the audience has limited time to absorb it.
- Graphs should be easy to interpret quickly, with minimal complexity and as little text as possible.
- Summary diagrams and simple visuals help a lot, but unrestrained slide animation can be distracting.
- Do not use big blocks of text longer than 2 short lines often, and use dot points to provide visual structure where appropriate.

These and other simple considerations are so often disregarded that just adhering to them can make a presentation stand out.

Ask other people

In general, it is difficult to get good slides without deliberating on them beforehand with informed and opinionated people. Presentations can require a surprising amount of effort to get right. Only experience will make things better, but experience takes time, and getting the perspective of others is the only shortcut available. Ask a variety of people to give their time on this and listen to them with humility, noting how well they grasp and interpret the slides. If they struggle to understand some part of the talk then that part absolutely must be rethought and reconstructed. For example, an unexpected but simple misconception may arise in the listener; if this cannot be avoided, raise that misconception at that point in the talk and specifically try to dispel it. Also, check the listener really did understand all of the talk and are not being polite or are misinterpreting something key.

This whole process of getting criticism can be a bit bruising for the ego, but must be done because you, the speaker, are so familiar with the material compared to the audience that it can be hard to put yourself in their place.

The audience

Consider:

- What will the audience expect from your talk?
- Why are you addressing them?
- What knowledge can you assume they have?
- How will they vary in their knowledge background?

These are issues that must be addressed when preparing a talk. It will help prevent an inappropriate launch into a deep jargon-filled exposition without carefully introducing the subject (and the jargon) to the audience: if not, eyes will glaze over for sure.

Get the opening lines right.

This is very important. It will grab the audience attention and make a good impression.

Explaining things

If there are concepts used that are not common knowledge they should be briefly introduced and their importance outlined. Don't take too long, but explain in as lay terms as possible. Once you have explained your concept in terms that a 12 year old will understand the audience will be with you (unless they are 11 years old) and you can use that concept freely. There will always be some concept you take for granted that others do not, and it is not easy to spot those. Again feedback and questions from others will enlighten you as to how well you explain things. Improvement will come with time.

Say three things.

As noted above, a common and useful approach is to introduce only three major points in a talk. That does not mean that detailed technical points should be shunned, but it is often best to restrict them to an identifiable middle part of your extended presentation. If that is done, those who know they are unlikely to understand (or care) can switch off

for a while, returning attention later to focus on your three main points as you re-iterate them.

Notes

Avoid using notes if possible, however, notes (and PowerPoint presenter mode text) can help to keep the talk on track. If using notes try not simply read them verbatim. That never sounds great (and can sound terrible), but if a presenter is not fully fluent in English it is the best option.

Using quotes and epithets

It is often a good idea to use interesting quotes, light anecdotes and the occasional curious observation in a talk, time permitting. It allows a little relief and punctuates the lecture, especially if it is getting a bit dry. Invite interjections if that is possible in the format, as that serves the same purpose and can help make sure the audience is with you and thinking, or at least awake.

Be merciful to your audience

Do not pack too much into a short talk. Don't make it intense and hard.

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