

GOING PUBLIC WITH IMPACT

JANUARY 2015: GIVING GREAT TALKS

As a graduate student, postdoc, academic, or researcher, you'll be called on time and time again to give talks – from research updates at lab meetings to journal clubs with your peers to keynote presentations in front of huge audiences of not-necessarily-experts-in-your-field to public lectures. Giving a clear, concise, and engaging presentation is key to your short- and long-term success. In the short-term, giving a great talk in a graduate course where presentations form the basis of your mark means better grades and, in turn, more scholarship opportunities; in other words, if you're awesome at talking, it can earn you money! In the longer term, being a great presenter is integral to your scholarly reputation. Giving that one memorable talk out of a long day of conference presentations will leave your audience excited, enthused, and wanting to talk to you more about your work, along with earning you invitations to speak at other conferences and the respect of your peers whose presentation skills are not as finely honed. When it comes to giving a killer talk, focus on three things:

1. Delivering a clear, concise message

- Before sitting down in front of your slide software, take some time to work through the following:
 - Remember why you're talking: the point of most presentations is to give the audience a high-level overview of your work, not the nitty-gritty detail
 - The goal of your talk should be to have the audience understand what you did and be able to provide useful feedback
 - Select a single, central message and have everything in your talk support that. Repeat that message often throughout your talk
 - Think about who your audience will be and tailor the content to fit their backgrounds. Experts in a very specific area? Throw out the general intro slides and head right to the issue and results. General public? Provide background, gloss over technical methods.
- Once you've determined your audience and your central message, try writing a draft of what you'd like to say in Word, then decide how much of that script should be included on each slide. It's better to design your slides around your script than to try to fit a script into a set of slides.
- Your script needs to answer the key questions: what was the problem you looked at, what did you do, what did you find, and why should we care?
- Use lay language: avoid jargon, symbols, and acronyms. Use metaphors, analogies, and real-world examples and anecdotes whenever possible. Remember that just because the language is simple doesn't mean the ideas have to be - using simple language isn't "dumbing something down" - it's making it accessible.
- Clear and refreshing talks are memorable talks, especially at the end of a long conference day. Be refreshing!

2. Creating memorable visuals

- Consider breaking out of the PowerPoint box and trying a new presentation tool. Keynote gives you substantial control over your slides' look and feel. If you stick with PowerPoint, try starting from scratch - completely blank, white slides!
- Also stock your computer with some new fonts - fontquirrel.com has some excellent options, and they're free! Remember though - if you're presenting on a laptop that isn't your own, those fonts won't be there. You'll need to export your slides as PDFs or turn them into images if you'll be presenting on another computer (more on that in Section 3!)
- Keep the text on your slides to a minimum! Having full or near-complete sentences onscreen just encourages your audience to read your slides rather than listen to you. Statements are alright when used as slide headlines, but limit their use elsewhere. Include keywords that trigger your memory of your talk's script and that the audience can use to jot down notes, but always remember that less is more when it comes to onscreen text.
- Images are a powerful complement to a talk, and the number of slides with images - either data or an image that illustrates a key point of the slide - should be greater than the number of slides without images.
- Sites like freeimages.com and compfight.com are great sources of royalty-free, high-quality stock images. Google Image search also works, but only if you use the Search Tools options to choose high-resolution images (under "size") and images for which reuse is permitted (under "usage rights").
- Use iPad apps or other tools to play with the colours and lighting in your images, like you would use Instagram filters.



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2. Creating memorable visuals (continued)

- Follow the “remove to improve” principle when it comes to presenting data as a graph. Think first about what it is you really want to say with your graph, and design it to highlight that and that alone. Remove backgrounds, redundant labels, and borders. Reduce colours so only key data points are highlighted. Remove special effects like bevels and drop shadows. Remove bolding and lighten text labels. Lighten or remove grid lines; instead, directly label your graph with values.
- Try getting REALLY creative with your images - draw or create your own!
- Slideology by Nancy Duarte is an excellent source of presentation inspiration.
- Garr Reynolds' blog PresentationZen.com is another fantastic resource, with tips covering all aspects of presenting, from designing to delivering and many posts describing slide before-and-after makeovers.

3. A confident and authentic delivery

- Confidence comes from knowing your stuff. There are two tricks to help you with this:
 - First, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Practice your script so many times that you could run through your slides without even having them in front of you. As you give more and more talks on the same subject, this will eventually become second nature. However, at first you must take the how-to-get-to-Carnegie-Hall route: PRACTICE!
 - Second, never forget that you are the expert! When you're presenting your own research, this is something you and you alone have done. You are in control!
- Your slides should be designed so as to trigger your memories of what you want to say on each slide. Figuring out what's on the next slide can be tricky. There are two tricks here too:
 - When rehearsing, memorize your transitions between slides. You might have a certain sentence, for example, that you learn to say at the end of slide 24 that perfectly segues into slide 25. Memorize all of these so you don't seem surprised when the next slide comes up.
 - Master the art of Presenter View. Both PowerPoint and Keynote offer this, and it will let you see your presenter notes (if any), the next slide, the current time, and the elapsed time. Getting it to work is hell on a PC with Powerpoint but it's worth it. When the projector is connected, our computer should recognize the second display. PowerPoint and Keynote should then sense that they can use Presenter View, though sometimes you have to muck with the display settings to get it working. Practice setting it up. Often.
- Arrive at your presentation site early to get hooked up and do a quick dry run of your slides. This will let you spot any Presenter View issues or wonky fonts before anyone is the wiser.
- Presenting off your own laptop is always best – you know you have the right fonts/files/etc... Presenting off other laptops is more complicated. To avoid having your artfully designed slides ruined in translation, your options include:
 - Exporting your slides as PDFs and using a PDF viewer in full-screen mode to display them. This obviously won't allow for complex transitions, but you can fudge simple animations by setting them up over multiple slides.
 - Export your slides as images and load them into a new PowerPoint or whatever file. This is sometimes a necessary evil when you are presenting at a huge conference where talks are managed from a central A/V system and the organizers want everything in PowerPoint (though the tides are turning here, and organizers usually now permit PowerPoint, Keynote, or PDF.)
- Be your own true, authentic self on stage – don't feel like you need to act like some wise orator or sage old professor. If you're bubbly and enthusiastic, be that on stage. Jokester? Be funny. Deadpan? Do that. Just be you.
- Bring personality to your talk – use the stage to share the behind-the-scenes stuff that never makes into journal articles.

NEXT SESSION: FEB. 25 - MEDIA!

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