Twelve suggestions for presenting a successful talk

Giving a talk at a conference is something that all behavioural ecologists must do at some point, and yet there are surprisingly few guides to help you go about this. Here I give several suggestions on how to prepare yourself for speaking, and how to improve your slides and the general smoothness of your presentation. I composed this informal list simply because I had never seen one by anyone else, and while I don't expect everyone will agree with all of it, hopefully most people will find something useful in it.

1) Don't panic! First of all, nothing really bad is going to happen. The stage is not going to collapse, the ceiling projector is not going to drop on your head, and your clothes are not going to suddenly fall off! It's only natural to be nervous, but don't make the situation worse for yourself by envisioning a lecture theatre filled with crotchety old professors eager to publicly humiliate you with cutting comments and nasty questions. In reality, the majority of academics are nice people, and if they really disagree with your talk they are much more likely to either seek you out privately later to discuss it or just let it pass altogether. Always remember that the vast majority of the audience is on your side before you even say anything: they have made the effort to be there because they are interested in your research and want to learn something. Nobody wants to see you slip up. Also, since many of them will have given a talk themselves and understand how nerve-wracking it can be, a few little wobbles from the speaker are hardly unexpected. Even if there are a few 'big cheeses' sitting in the dark corners, take confidence from the fact that you know more about the specifics of the subject and your study system than the remainder of the audience.

2) Appreciate that you've never had it so good. Giving a talk has never been more straightforward than it is today thanks to PowerPoint, which in one merciful stroke consigned overhead projectors, CCTV and the dreaded slide carousels to the dustbin. Provided the various formatting options are used with restraint (see note 3) it is not too difficult to generate a very professional-looking presentation, and you can now give the audience an enjoyable 'hands-on' feel for your research by embedding sound clips and videos of animals in action. PowerPoint's user-friendliness also makes it easy to totally overhaul a talk you are unhappy with or fine-tune an existing talk until you are satisfied, which was a real hassle in the days of slides.

3) Don't overcomplicate the appearance of your slides. The latest version of PowerPoint does indeed contain a dazzling array of backgrounds, colours, fonts and font-styles. However, just because they are available does not mean you have to use them. Certain combinations of background, text and font style can be very difficult to read, particularly if they vary between slides, and remember that approximately 7% of men are red-green colour blind. The best combination is usually a simple, sans serif font on a plain or subtly-featured background. Avoid placing text over a background photograph, as this can be unreadable, especially if the text goes across differently-coloured areas of the photo. Also, think carefully before using animated text. A rapid series of text blocks zooming in from all angles is more likely to induce motion sickness than interest. A more effective way to introduce a series of points is to create a sequence of duplicate slides in which each point is highlighted in turn while the others are darkened or subdued. Modifying duplicate slides is also a nice way to build up a complex figure or flow chart that would be otherwise overwhelming. Begin with a slide showing the basic relationship or key components,
then add in levels of detail by overlaying progressively more complicated versions of
the original slide. Finally, slides that look great on your computer do not always look
so good on the big screen. Once you have prepared your slides, try viewing them
from the back of a practice room to make sure they look OK.

4) **Don’t overdo the text.** The audience will soon lose interest if your slides are a
daunting series of long-winded sentences and statements, especially if you then
proceed to read them verbatim (something else to be avoided by the way – after all,
the audience can just as easily read them themselves). The best slides are often
those with just a few subheadings that act as prompts for points which you then
elaborate upon verbally. If you absolutely cannot avoid a series of text-heavy slides,
perhaps because of the need to explain a particularly complex methodology, then
you could try interleaving them with a couple of quick photographs of your study
species, field site or experimental set-up in order to keep your talk alive.

If your talk still seems like a fairly tedious plod of bullet pointed lists of text, an
alternative way to get the message across is to use schematics such as flow charts,
with arrows between each variable or event. These arrows can then be given positive
or negative symbols to illustrate the direction of relationships or sequence of events.
Lastly, avoid having text at the bottom of your slides since people at the back of the
room may not be able to read it because of the person in front of them.

5) **Don’t try to say too much.** You’ve put a lot of hard work into collecting your
data so it is tempting to present all of it in order to impress the audience. Unfortunately, if you overwhelm people with information and frequently divert into
data that are somewhat tangential the audience will become confused and lose sight
of what your main question was. Likewise, if you have too many slides you will be
forced to rush through each one with only a brief explanation, and if you don’t reach
your summary the audience will not get the critically important ‘take-home
message’. A talk that runs badly over time is uncomfortable for everyone, especially
the poor moderator who has to tactfully interrupt you. Remember that the audience
would much rather see a good talk based on relatively little data than a bad one
based on lots.

6) **Be careful when using humour.** Any talk can be enlivened by a few light-
hearted remarks or slides featuring cartoons, sound effects or comedic fieldwork
situations, especially if they help to make a point. However, there are few things
more embarrassing for both the speaker and audience than a joke that dies
completely (I speak from experience, and from both sides). The easiest way to avoid
these awkward silences is to steer clear of potentially offensive topics. Politically-
charged barbs, disparaging comments about religion, leaden puns and crude sexual
innuendoes are much more likely to backfire than clarify your study. If in doubt, try
the jokes out on your lab-mates while practicing. If they don’t laugh, nobody else
will.

7) **Don’t despair if your talk looks like it will be too long.** There are plenty of
opportunities for shaving off a few precious seconds here and there. For instance;

a) never read out your title slide. It is already up on the screen for all to see, and
even if it isn’t, the moderator has probably just read it out together with the names
of your co-authors and institution

b) don’t bother with a ‘talk outline’ slide. These can be effective as part of a longer,
keynote lecture, but are a waste of time in a standard talk since these all follow the
exact same format of an introduction, methods, results then a discussion
c) don’t dwell on basic field or lab methods unless they are particularly relevant. Many of these are now so standard they are almost taken for granted, especially if you are in a specialist symposium (e.g. how you caught and bled animals for genetic analyses or how you extracted DNA etc).

d) don’t dwell on statistics unless they are unusual, complex, or an explicit aspect of your study (e.g. a new type of analysis). It is simply not worth taking the time to introduce each analysis with ‘We compared weights between group 1 and group 2 using a t-test etc’. The pool of analyses used to compare means or test for relationships is actually fairly small (t-test, U-test, χ², correlation, and the various forms of ANOVA and regression) and most of the audience will either anticipate which one you used or can see for themselves provided you state it explicitly on your slide e.g. ‘Spearman’s r = 0.12 n = 20 P = 0.76’.

Also, there are several small snippets of information relevant to the data that can be inserted onto slides as sidebars rather than stated verbally, such as ‘data square-root transformed for analysis’ or ‘data checked for normality’.

e) don’t spend too long on the acknowledgements. By all means draw attention to people who have been particularly helpful, but listing every single person who played some role in your study and explaining what each of them did takes too long and will be forgotten the moment the next talk starts. Instead, try dividing your acknowledgements slide into categories, such as ‘Field assistants’ then list their names, and even photos if you have space, then ‘Lab assistants’, then ‘Funding’ etc. If you leave this slide up at the end people can read through it while you are answering questions.

8) Practice, practice, practice. There can be a world of difference between how a talk sounds in your head and how it sounds when you try to say it out loud, especially if you are not a naturally talkative person. Practicing in front of your lab-mates is a great way to identify slides that you stumble over or struggle to transition between, or slides that seem perfectly clear to you but are hopelessly confusing to everyone else. Your talk will ultimately be a lot better if they are frank with their feedback, even if it means taking out your most treasured and perfectly-formatted slide! The more you practice your talk, the smoother your delivery will be on the big day.

9) Anticipate computer problems. Take several copies of your talk to the meeting and use more than one format (e.g. CD and USB thumb drive) just in case the local computer can not read one of them. As a back-up, e-mail the talk to yourself so you can always download it later if you arrive at your destination but your luggage does not! If you have embedded sound clips or videos in your talk, make sure you take the original files in case there is a problem uploading, and be prepared to carry on unruffled if your video will not play during your talk.

10) Use the podium accessories. Many conference rooms are sufficiently large that it is impossible for people in the back rows to hear you unless you use a microphone. This is not as simple as it sounds however, since the microphone is usually fixed to the podium, meaning that your voice will decrease to a whisper if you wander away from the podium or turn your head to look at the big screen. To avoid these fluctuations, try to remain by the microphone, and follow the progress of your talk by looking down at the monitor in front of you rather than at the screen. Laser pointers are best used in moderation. They are useful for highlighting certain data points but can become very annoying and distracting if you use them to whiz bright red streaks back and forth on every slide.
11) Learn from other presentations. Whenever you see a really good talk, ask yourself what it was about it that made it good (and if you see a bad talk, try to identify why it was bad). Inevitably, part of this will be the data – it is easier to give a seamless talk if the data are great and unambiguously support your hypothesis. Irrespective of the data, however, almost all good talks feature a confident speaker who transitions smoothly between slides that are economical with text, and who follows the classic talk structure of a clear outline of what the hypothesis is and how it was tested, a presentation of only the graphs or tables that are directly relevant, then a neat summary of what the data show.

12) Don’t despair if it ‘doesn’t go well’. Talks never proceed as perfectly as you want them to, probably because you have an idealized mental image of how they will play out and so any slight hesitation, stumble or omission detracts from this. Fortunately, since the audience never saw your idealized image, they probably never even noticed and thought the talk went better than you did! Nor should you let yourself be undone by other potentially disconcerting situations. For instance, you may only attract a small audience because someone very prestigious or in a more well-studied research area is talking in a parallel session. This is just circumstance, and does not demean the importance or quality of your own work. Also, if you don’t get many questions, don’t assume this means nobody was interested: it is just as likely that people are digesting the information before coming up with a question, or that you explained everything well and your data were thoroughly convincing!

Even if your talk didn’t go as well as you would have liked, don’t let this spoil your enjoyment of the rest of the conference, and don’t let it prevent you from approaching people to discuss your data. Behavioral ecologists are a community after all, and people are much more likely to help you than dismiss you.

Good luck!

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