GIVING A PRESENTATION
AT AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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General comments
- Public speaking can be rewarding and empowering, but also traumatic. It will be less traumatic if you prepare well.
- You have something to say. You want to say it with calm confidence in a way that is accessible and interesting, using appropriate resources.

Preparing
- Know the audience. If you don't know, find out – especially in cultures with which you are unfamiliar.
- Make sure you know how much time you have got, and don't try to cram too much in. Three major ideas per ten minutes is about right.
- Try to put yourself in your audience's place. How specialised is this conference? What will be their starting point – linguistically, conceptually etc.? What might their expectations be?
- Be aware that your audience will likely focus on listening, not reading. People can't stop and go back when they're listening: make sure that you give them the time and the means to understand (examples etc.).
- The newer an idea is to the audience, the more careful you must be in introducing and exemplifying it.
- Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you've told them – probably more than once.
- Consider variety of presentation: visual support, variation of pace, illustrative anecdotes etc. Mark the places on your notes where you're going to show a visual or stop to recapitulate, explain or tell an anecdote. The longer the presentation, the more important variety is: people lose concentration over time.
- Be clear about whether, and when, you wish to ask for audience questions and comments. Plan for this and make it clear at the beginning of your presentation.
- The *beginning* is very important. Joke, anecdote, challenge, topical reference, striking visual… at least give a clear statement of why your topic and ideas are significant.
- *The end* is quite important, too: at least they must have a cue for applause or leave-taking.
- People use different sorts of prompts, ranging from small cue cards to A4 notes or the PowerPoint Notes function. Use whatever suits you, but remember not to bury your head in your notes and just read. Staple or treasury-tag paper/card notes together so as not to get them out of order if you drop them. Make a paper backup of PowerPoint on-screen notes in case the venue PowerPoint software doesn't support them.
- Make your notes clear for yourself, e.g. highlight key points. Mark clearly for yourself where you will use handouts, change PowerPoint slides etc.

Before you go to the conference
- Rehearse the talk beforehand, and time it. Remember not to rush, and to pause between phrases, to help your audience take in what you are saying. Leave an extra two minutes per twenty minutes anyway. Don't just read from your paper/cards when rehearsing. Stop from time to time to recap or illustrate with an anecdote. It is vital that you leave time for questions, because this may be the most profitable part of the session for you.
- If English is not your first language, or if you are using terms that you have only seen in writing and not heard, check your pronunciation of any key term you are going to use.
- Think in advance about what can be cut if you start late, or start running out of time; and mark this on your notes. (Far better than just dropping the end, which probably has important information in it!)
- Mark on your notes the times when you should be getting to each major part of your presentation, so you'll know on the day if your schedule is slipping.
- Will you be introduced? If there's a chance, prepare biodata so as not to be flustered on the day.
- Find out maximum audience numbers and make handouts before you go: it won't always be easy to do this at the conference. Photocopiers can suddenly malfunction, paper can run out, or there can be queues.
- Check you have everything with you: laptop, materials, etc. Email your PowerPoint slides to the organisers if possible, in addition to having them on your laptop and on a memory stick.
- If you're flying, put your presentation materials in your carry-on luggage!

When you arrive at the conference; on the day
- When you get to the venue, check that your name, title, room and time are correct in the programme. If not, take action: there will need to be announcements, notices etc., including something on the door of the room where you're presenting.
- If there is a chairperson, make contact with them in advance, and give them your biodata, if appropriate.
- Get to the room early. Often conferences run series of presentations back to back, so this may mean arriving before your talk, e.g. during a break, and making sure things are OK, especially the technology.
- Make sure your visuals are visible from the back of the room. Make sure the laptop and your PowerPoint are functioning properly and are compatible; save your presentation onto the desktop of the computer (it runs faster that way). Test the microphone, if there is one, for feedback, and for how far you hold it from your mouth (or how far you stand from it). Arrange your notes and resources.
- If you are the first person in a series of presentations, either compose yourself or greet people as they arrive. Put your title on the screen, so anybody coming into the wrong room will realise it and leave quickly.
- If you are not the first person, accept that you will not get much out of the presentation just before yours. Spend the last few minutes of that time making sure you are ready. Breathe slowly for two minutes; this will trick your body into producing less adrenalin, so that you will feel calmer.

During
- Don't get upset if there aren't very many people. Everybody has had the experience of talking to a small audience. It is disappointing, but just give them your best performance. The show must go on.
- If you're not introduced, start by saying who you are and what the talk's about (in case some people are in the wrong room).
- Speak slowly and PAUSE between phrases. This gives people time to process what you've just said.
- Leave PowerPoint slides up long enough for note-taking, or make it clear that the material is on handouts.
- Don't leave a PowerPoint slide on when you've finished talking about it. Consider using the B button which blacks out the screen when you are not referring to a slide; press it again for the slides to reappear.
- Respect the next speaker if there is one. Finish on time; don't assume the whole audience is so fascinated that they want to run over. Clear your materials, clean the board, take the CD or memory stick out of the computer. If there are people who want to speak to you, take them out of the room with you.

Things
- Possible handouts:
  - Sets of data that you will comment on
  - Key points
  - A fairly complete summary
  - An interesting paper related to what you have been saying
  - Bibliography
  NB: Distributing your handouts at the beginning will avoid people madly scribbling unnecessary notes; or tell them you will give them a handout and they needn't write it down. Get permission if copyright material is used, including images!
- PowerPoint
  - Keep it simple.
  - Use a big enough typeface, though not too big – remember the effect data projection has on size. 30 point should be a maximum, though 24 or 26 would be standard. Smaller than 24 can be unreadable.
  - Use colours, but avoid white printing on dark background, and especially avoid white printing on light background. Avoid using a background with a pattern that will interfere with the printing. Black print on a pastel background is perfect.
  - Don't use too many words; don't put up everything you want to say, just the key points.
  - Use photographic images to replace words [www.istockphoto.com is a good source and cheap]
  - Don't overwhelm people with too many numbers and statistics.
  - Integrate video where useful.
  - Do not use complicated special effects. Only use graphics that really enhance the message. Avoid irrelevant sound effects. Simple transition effects such as Appear can be appropriate. The audience should focus on the message, not the technology.
  - Building up diagrams gradually, where appropriate, can be effective.
  - Have [bring, borrow, ask for] a presenter aid for clicking slides forward. This allows you to move around as you speak.

- Use the PowerPoint presentation; don't let it use you. Don't just read from the screen – make remarks that explain or amplify. For variety, once or twice in a presentation, you can stop speaking and simply let the audience read the slide themselves.
- Don't have too many slides – you want the audience to listen to you, not just read the presentation.
- Think what you will do if the PowerPoint fails, or you can't log onto the laptop. Having handouts can save your presentation in a case like this.
- <u>CDs and DVDs</u>: Make sure you can find your place easily
- <u>Arrange notes</u>, materials etc. neatly so you won't be scrabbling.
- <u>Board</u>: If you are writing on a white board or a flipchart, don't plan to spend too much time doing so (prefer PowerPoint slides or even handouts). If you are going to use a board, practice writing / drawing clearly.
- <u>Microphone</u>: To use it or not? Consider mobility issues versus audibility / stress on you of speaking loud enough to be heard.

Your body
- Be sensitive to the norms of the host country and organisation, and dress accordingly. Wear clothes and shoes that look professional, but are comfortable: you want to feel that you look good, but during your presentation you don't want to be thinking about your feet hurting.
- Decide in advance whether you want to move around or not. Moving helps hold audience interest, but if you are nervous, you may prefer a fixed position; and PowerPoint controls or microphone may constrain you.
- Always stand, if possible. Your default position: facing the audience, or at 90º if necessary for the PowerPoint.
- Try not to move your body or parts of your body nervously – it does not put audiences at ease. Use calm, slow gestures, across your body rather than towards and away from you (more readable by the audience).
- Don't speak too fast. Pause between phrases.
- Make eye contact with members of the audience in different parts of the hall (don't just sweep). If you are nervous about this, try looking at people in a 'W' pattern: someone at the left front, then left back, centre front, etc. Avoid gazing at the floor or looking over people's heads.
- Don't read from your slides. You can refer or point to something… but don't just read.

Other people: dealing with the audience
Rapport:
- Treat the audience as equals.
- Be friendly and adopt an appropriate degree of formality or informality, according to the context.
Latecomers:
- If they're seating themselves, just carry on.
- If they're disrupting, help to seat them.
- You may decide to use them as a pretext for a recapitulation of what you've said so far.
Fielding questions:
- Respect and value questions and points made, even if they seem weak or odd to you.
- You may need to repeat or summarise questions spoken quietly so that the rest of the audience can hear and process them.
- You can stall: '…interesting question', or 'Give me a minute to think about that', or reflect question back: ' Do you mean…'
- In some cases, you can ask for a view from other members of the audience.
- You don't have to know everything! You can get back to someone – talk later in the conference or write/email.
Critics:
- Keep calm.
- Make a criticism a discussion point, without losing your timings.
- Diplomacy can fail. Agree that you disagree and offer to talk to them afterwards. Don't get defensive. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know something.