Information for Paper Presenters
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From many years of watching good and bad oral presentations, I have developed a set of suggestions that will increase the chance that your presentation will fall into the "good" category.

A good presentation is important because the effectiveness of your presentation will influence how seriously the audience considers your scholarship. If you fumble around, misplace slides, or cannot get your material to display on the screen, your audience will judge you (and consequently your work) in this light. Important scholarship, particularly if it is controversial, may be dismissed if you appear incompetent during your presentation. It is not that your presentation has to have the polish of a Broadway production, but you need to present your material in a straightforward and clear way if you want your audience to believe that you can think clearly and in a straightforward way.

Basic Issues

Bring any audio or visual material you have in two forms. For example, put your presentation on a memory stick and on a CD or put your presentation on a CD and bring your laptop. If you just have visual material, you can put it on a CD and print out some overheads. Despite people's best efforts, the technology does not always work. If you only have your presentation on a CD and the CD drive on the computer in the room where you are making your presentation suddenly does not work, you will not be able to make your presentation. Think of all the disasters that might befall you and try to head off as many of them as you can. For example, if I am giving an important presentation somewhere, I have it on my computer, a memory stick, and printed on overheads. I carry the overheads separately from my computer and I put the memory stick in my pocket. You will spend a lot of time getting your presentation ready, and with another five to fifteen minutes you can ensure that you have put it in enough forms that you will be able to present it despite one or two technological disasters.

It is true that you can blame your inability to deliver your presentation on the technology if it is not working—but that is not nearly as satisfying as being able to deliver a presentation that you have spent considerable energy preparing.

Arrive 15 minutes before your presentation. There is a 15-minute break between presentations. Arriving during the break will give you sufficient time to get your audio or video material ready and ensure that it is working correctly. Any problems can be solved without using time from your presentation. After you ensure that your presentation is set to go, you can sit in the back of the room and relax a bit, walk outside, or do whatever it is that you do to center yourself.

My father's rule, which he drummed into me so often that I feel compelled to follow it still, is that, for important events, you should always leave early enough that if you have a flat tire on the road you can fix it and still get where you are going on time. How long does it take you to fix a flat tire on your car? That is how early you should leave (bring a book you enjoy or some work so that you will have something to do during the 99.8% of times that this rule results in your getting somewhere 15 minutes early (that's how long it takes me to fix a flat)). Do you even know where the jack in your car is???

Dress purposefully. Most of us make conscious or unconscious judgments about a person by what that person wears. Consider this as you decide what to wear to your presentation. Are you trying to come across as a contrarian? a deliberate researcher? a creative genius? a future business executive? How you see yourself should influence what you wear to your presentation. Many modes of dress are
appropriate for presentations at the Undergraduate Research Conference. Each of them will convey something to your audience, so be deliberate in what you wear.

Preparing for Your Talk

The most important piece of advice I have is this: You must practice your talk by saying it out loud. You cannot just "think" your talk. You must form the words and say them out loud. This is absolutely essential. Although you might practice your talk in bits and pieces as it is coming together, you must practice it in its entirety out loud, to the point where you are pleased with it. The three primary advantages of saying your talk out loud are:

- You will discover all those words, phrases, and sentences that you stumble over. Work on these until you can say them without stumbling. You have to train the muscles of your tongue, lips, etc. to do this. Thinking through the sentences will not work (it would be like players on the basketball team "thinking" their way through making free throws rather than actually practicing free throws).

- You will discover the confusing parts of your talk and the places where you have a lousy transition from one part of the talk to another. Saying the talk out loud will make these problems clear to you so that you can fix them before you get in front of your audience.

- You will be able to adjust your talk so that it fits into the time allotted. Without practicing the entire talk out loud, you will not know how long it takes to deliver. Many presenters find that their written material takes much longer to present than they had anticipated. Consequently, they must rush through or eliminate important material at the end of their talks because they suddenly find themselves with three minutes to give eight minutes worth of material.

If more than one person will be making the presentation, it is particularly important that you practice it several times. It is essential that each presenter knows what material he or she will present. When presenters fumble around and trip over each other they look like idiots.

If there are two presenters it is best to have two parts to the presentation; if there are three presenters it is best to have three parts. Going back and forth several times, with each person talking for two minutes or so, tends to be confusing and too much time is lost making transitions.

Assessing the timing of the presentation by practicing it out loud is particularly important when more than one person is presenting. The first person (or first people) must ABSOLUTELY keep to the amount of time they are given. The last person, who is often giving final results and pulling the presentation together, should not have to rush through his or her presentation because those speaking earlier took too much time.

After one or two full run-throughs of your complete talk, delete material if needed, so that your talk fits into the time allotted. Avoid the allure of talking more quickly so that you can get all the material in. This often results in a talk that is much too fast-paced to allow those in the audience to hear and then begin to digest your presentation. Talk at a normal pace and spend some time pausing after important concepts or restating them in an alternate way so that your audience understands them. Give a very good talk with less material rather than an impossible-to-understand talk with more material.
Consider videotaping yourself practicing your talk. If you can do this, look for two things: annoying vocalizations and odd gestures. For example, students these days are prone to put the word like into every sentence. If you do this in your everyday speech, you are likely to do it in your talk without realizing that you are. If you watch yourself on a video, you will notice this. Another common annoying vocalization is um or uuhhh inserted between phrases or sentences. My dissertation advisor had the annoying habit of clearing his throat after every two or three sentences during his talks (interestingly, he never did this otherwise). Also, watch for things like pulling on your earlobe, scratching your nose, or moving your head in odd ways.

What to do if you notice annoying vocalizations or odd gestures on the videotape? Practice your talk a few more times paying close attention to yourself and eliminating the vocalizations or gestures you want to eliminate. When giving your talk use 5% of your brain to observe yourself and flash a warning if needed (e.g., "that's the second time you've pulled on your hair-stop it!").

When giving your talk to your audience, do not get flustered if you notice that a few likes or arm-pulls have occurred-just keep them at a minimum. One or two during a talk is not a problem-it is only when they occur frequently that they become a distraction.

Some people prefer to read their talk. This is certainly a reasonable thing to do, particularly if you are giving a talk for the first time or if your anxiety inhibits your presentation otherwise. However, you should still practice reading your talk. Put enough inflection into your voice to keep the audience interested.

If you read your talk, it is probably best to double-space it on regular paper. Note cards must be changed too frequently (I never did understand the value of using note cards) and single-spaced text increases the likelihood of your skipping a line or reading a line twice. Print your talk so that natural breaks in your vocalizations (e.g., between paragraphs) occur at the end of a page, so that when you turn the page it does not seem to interrupt your talk. This may result in your using an additional page or two, but that is preferable to breaking a sentence in half as you flip from one page to another. Narrow the margins and reduce the space at the top and bottom of the page if you want to get more text on a page. Number the pages so that you can notice easily if they are out of order.

Attend to the printed pages if you are giving a dramatic reading or reading poetry or prose. Figure out where the "page turning" breaks should occur. In a dramatic reading these breaks may occur at different places for different readers (putting them at different places will also reduce the distraction that can occur if all the readers turn a page simultaneously).

Make sure that the visual material you present can be seen by your audience. I have attended many talks where the presenter splashes a slide on the screen that contains a zillion numbers and says, "I know that you can't see these numbers, but . . . ." I want to stand up and scream, "If you know I can't read the numbers why did you put them up there?" It is just absurd that people do this. Figure out a way to make the material presented on each slide readable by your audience. Make more slides if necessary.

During Your Talk

Have a strategy for dealing with the inevitable mistakes that occur as you give your talk, particularly if you know that you will be anxious. One strategy that I have used when I stumble over a word at the beginning of a talk is to say, "It's hard to say (whatever the word was) when you're as nervous
as I am." This usually results in a smile from many members of the audience and a lightening of the mood in the room.

One of professors who taught me how to be a therapist years ago had the saying, "When in trouble, self-disclose on the double." Although the cadence of the saying is a bit awkward, it contains a great message. If, say, you skip a page when reading your talk and realize this halfway through the second sentence on the new page (now you are in trouble) you can say "Oh, that can't be right-I must have skipped a page" (that's the self-disclosure) Then, flip the page to get yourself back on track. The supportive noises from the audience should help you maintain your cool. But, say you do this and find that there is a page missing (even more trouble). You could say, "Egad! there's a page missing (the self-disclosure). Well, this is what it said on that page. . . . ."

Your audience will want you to do well. If there is a problem, just let them know there is a problem and work to fix it. You do not need to keep it secret from them. Doing this risks alienating them a bit. Letting them know that you are having a problem makes you more human and gives them even more reason to want you to do well.

Of course, there is a difference between having a problem and being ill-prepared. We all make mistakes. Although careful preparation reduces our mistakes, they can still happen. Without careful preparation, however, the number of mistakes is likely to grow to the point where your audience recognizes that you have not put in the time necessary to create a good presentation. That's when they'll turn on you.

NEVER, ever, read the visual presentation you have. It is amazing how many presenters read their slides to the audience. Why, I wonder, do they do this? Have they given this presentation to illiterate audiences in the past? Are they planning to present the material to people who cannot read the presenter's language? Does the presenter think that we are all idiots?

There are two basic strategies for integrating visual and oral information.

The first strategy is to put details on the screen and then talk about the overarching picture that the details present. For example, if I am presenting information about the students who completed a survey on which my talk is based, I might put up a slide with a lot of specific data (e.g., percentages of male/female, mean and median ages, socioeconomic status levels, racial/ethnic breakdown, etc., etc.). While this is displayed, I might say, "This is the demographic information from the undergraduates completing the survey. Comparing these data with data on all undergraduates at UAlbany shows that the characteristics of the students who completed the survey are similar to the characteristics of the students across the UAlbany campus." I might then pause a bit to let the audience look at the slide, but this pause is usually quite brief. People can read very quickly.

The second strategy is to provide some data on the screen and then provide additional details verbally. For example, if I have used a 5-point scale to have the students describe their family income (using labels like upper income, upper-middle income, etc.), I might display the mean, median, and standard deviation on the screen and then say, "4% of the students described themselves as coming from an upper-income family, 32% from an upper-middle income family, 42% from a middle-income family . . . . ." I would be careful not to read the mean, median, and standard deviation.
Reading some material you present visually is appropriate, but the amount should be small. For example, reading something presented on the screen can emphasize it. For example, when presenting a slide with the demographic data from a sample, I might say, "As you can see, 75% of the participants were female, so these data probably tell us more about the beliefs of females than males on this campus."

A common mistake is to spend too much time on introductory material, which leaves too little time to describe the unique contributions of your research. When practicing your talk, try to devote no more than 1/3 of your time to introductory material (preferably about 1/4). The introduction is primarily to provide a context for understanding how your research fits into the current body of research. The goal is not to educate your audience about a broad topic. In other words, you are not acting like a professor delivering a lecture on a topic. Instead, you are providing a bit of information about a topic so that those who are familiar with it can understand how your research relates to it. For example, if your research involves some type of chemical reaction, you do not need to provide sufficient background for nonchemists to understand the broad topic of chemical reactions. Instead, provide just enough information about them so that those who are familiar with chemical reactions can understand how your results fit it with what is currently known about them. Similarly, if you are presenting a critique of one of Kierkegaard's hypotheses, you only need to provide enough information in your introduction to make the hypothesis clear—you do not need to provide a 10-minute talk outlining Kierkegaard's basic beliefs (or say when he was born or his mother's maiden name unless they relate to important elements of your research).

Finally, unless told differently by the moderator running your session, do not end your presentation by asking for questions. The plan for most sessions is to ask for questions at the end of the session rather than at the end of each presentation.