

HOW TO PRESENT A PAPER  
Griffith Feeney  
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International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis

The first prerequisite to presenting a good paper is to have a good paper. Unfortunately, this is not enough. You also need a good presentation. The requirements are elementary. I don't know why they are as unknown or ignored as I have observed them to be in nearly 20 years of attending academic conferences (my first was in 1969).

My focus here is on the 10-20 minute presentations generally expected at large gatherings. Hour long presentations are a very forgiving medium. You will probably manage to get a few points across no matter what you do.

Short presentations are very unforgiving. You must prepare rigorously. If you don't, your time will be up before you've even gotten properly started. One strike, so to speak, and you're out.

(1) Prepare. Doing research is one thing. Writing it up is another thing. Presenting at a conference is yet a third thing. The requirements of presentation are minuscule beside those of writing and research, but there are a few. You should learn them and prepare accordingly.

(2) Know How Much Time You Have. To the minute. Without this information you can't possibly prepare. If the organizers don't tell you, you have to ask.

(3) Ask Yourself: What Do I Want Them to Remember When I Am Done? You simply can't say very much in ten minutes. This is so simple to say, so hard to take to heart. Perhaps you should write it on a blackboard a few dozen times, as school children used to be made to do. Presenting a serious research paper in even twenty minutes is somewhat like moving from Macbeth to a 90 second television spot. It's impossible, really. You have to think of the presentation as an advertisement for the paper. You can get across two or three points in ten minutes. What should they be?

(4) Make Separate Notes/Text and Visuals for Presentations. DO NOT rely on your paper for this. You must prepare notes and/or text and visuals for each presentation, taking account of the time available and the points you want to make for this particular audience. Having decided what two or three points you want to make, the essential problem is how little you can say, that is, how much of the paper you can cut, and still get them across.

(5) DO NOT Prepare Too Many Visuals. It takes at least a few minutes for a viewer to absorb the content of an unfamiliar table, plot or diagram. Four visuals for a ten minute presentation may not be the limit, but it is close to it.

(6) NEVER Use Transparencies of Typed Material. They can't be seen. Anyone who has ever been to a meeting knows they can't be seen. What is the point of putting up something nobody can see? Yet it is done all the time, over and over, at every big conference. Even the large "Orator"

type is usually not big enough. Hand letter your visuals with transparency pens. Make the letters and numbers VERY big. This will force you to strictly limit the detail provided. This is good. The more narrow the focus, the better.

(7) ALWAYS Use Color in Transparencies/Slides. Color plots generally cannot be used in papers, but they can always be used in transparencies. Not to use color here is an appalling waste of the medium. Color works much better, especially in multiple line plots. Trace black and white plots onto transparencies using color pens. Even on single line plots, color provides valuable visual relief.

(8) Check Room and Equipment Before Session Begins. In a ten minute talk you can easily waste ten percent of your time looking for the projector ON/OFF switch, and you will look very silly do so to boot. To say nothing of focus, or learning how to turn on a light beam pointer, or finding a stick pointer. There simply is no excuse for not getting these things under control before your presentation.

(9) Time Yourself As You Present. Most of us have these marvelous electronic wrist watches with multiple functions, including a timer. If you don't have one, get one. Start this timer going as soon as your name is announced. Don't wait until you're in position to begin presenting, for at this point you'll almost surely forget to set the timer. Your presentation will be divided into several sections, with notes/text for each section on a page or file card. You will know at least roughly how much time each of the sections should take. In preparing for the presentation, cumulate these times through the end of the talk and note the running time through the end of each section very visibly on the corresponding page/card. In this way you can check at the end of each page or card whether you are running fast or slow.

(10) Don't Say What You're Going To Do: Just Do It. You don't have time for preambles. Get on with it.

(11) Never Apologize. You shouldn't need to apologize, of course. If you're not prepared, shame on you. If you've been put on the spot by someone else, shame on them. But in no case will apologizing help, and it can hurt by creating negative expectations. Be logical. If you're good, the apology will be wasted. If you're bad, no one will think the better of you for having apologized. Right? We all have self doubts. Keep them to yourself when presenting.

(12) Look At Your Visuals On The Screen As You Talk. On the screen, not on the surface of the transparency projector. Make sure the audience sees what you're talking about. Insure that the visual is not upside down or backwards, or that the scales along some edge are not missing.

(13) When Displaying Plots, Explain Axis Labels, Scales, and Legends. The audience can see these things for themselves, if you've prepared them properly, but make it easy for them, take them by the hand and lead them through it. Most of them will be lost if you don't. It can easily take one minute to do this, and this before you even get to the point of the plot. This is why you can't use more than one visual every few minutes.

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Add: Prepare a Strong Close

Know Your Audience

2 things at issue, your paper, and you

"Think of it this way: in 10 minutes you can do ten times as much as you could do in a 60 second TV spot"