

Presentation Hints

Here are some hints for giving an effective talk. Some of this list is taken from the materials provided by the International Conference on Testing Computer Software, June 1990, others from notes taken during my students' talks and from the ICSE Doctoral Symposium, 2001.

1. **Do Not Read Transparencies.** The audience can read them without your help. Your job is to interpret what the concise phrases mean by supplying explanations, examples, verbal descriptions, perspective, etc. Tell us a story about the slides.
2. **Always Start a Talk With Something the Audience Already Knows.** A good talk will have an introduction that begins by restating something the audience already knows, then presents new material in increasing levels of difficulty, then closes by relating each level to the previous level, and concluding by relating the entire talk to something the audience knew ahead of time.
3. **Transparencies Must Be in Order.** Numbering the transparencies helps reduce the possibility of them being printed out of order, and, in the event that this happens, makes it easier for the audience to follow you.
4. **Avoid Frames.** Frames take up more room and are harder to handle. Keep your transparencies from sticking by putting a sheet of blank paper between them, using an anti-static spray, or using a printed copy of the transparency as a spacer.
5. **Keep Them With You.** Keep your transparencies and notes with you in your briefcase or book bag. That way, you can get another run through on the plane. Most importantly, if you lose your transparencies, your talk will be a disaster. If you are using a PC projector, keep a spare copy on a diskette.
6. **Use a Timer.** Do not look at your watch; use a small digital traveling clock with big numbers, or an easily visible timer or clock, if one is available. If nothing else is available, take your watch off, put it on the lectern or table, and use that. If you have rehearsed often enough, you should be able to run through the entire thing, to the minute, with or without a clock.
7. **Do Not Read Your Talk.** Use the transparencies as notes, but talk to the people. Reading a paper or a speech is difficult; if it is not done well, it will be a catastrophe.
8. **Pick Out People.** Do not stare at the session chair, teacher, or screen. Pick out six to nine faces, equally distributed throughout the audience. Speak to each and make eye contact. Always look at some person when making an important point or conclusion. You are talking to only one person at a time, and each person feels that you have been talking to him or her personally. Lack of eye contact suggests evasiveness or lying.
9. **Speak Clearly and Assertively.** Do not use words that you do not understand. Do not allow your voice to drop when you are dealing with controversial ideas. Be assertive when you answer a question with "I don't know." The audience will respect your honesty.
10. **Don't Worry About Pronunciation.** If English is not your native language, try to get the pronunciation right, but don't agonize over it. Your session chair (or professor) will help you over the rough spots. If possible, rehearse with colleagues whose native language is English.
11. **Avoid Humor Unless You're Very Good at it.** Humor backfires more often than it works. Starting a technical talk with a joke doesn't work for most speakers. Humor has its place and is appreciated if done well, but it takes a lot of practice and experience to do it right. Making yourself the butt of the joke is always safest; making anyone else the butt of a joke is not acceptable.
12. **Stay in Control.** You can decide to answer questions from the audience during your talk or at the end. However, allowing questions during your talk is dangerous because you might lose control. Watch out for the person who starts by asking a question and ends up trying to give a talk of his own.
13. **Anticipate the Questions.** While rehearsing, think of the ten most difficult and embarrassing questions you may be asked and prepare the answers. Most of the actual questions won't be nearly as tough as these.
14. **Stimulants.** If you have a tendency to be nervous, your adrenaline level is high and the last thing you need is coffee.
15. **Point at the Screen, Not the Projector.** A huge tube flying in front of the text is very distracting. Even worse is pointing at a PC ... the audience cannot even see it. Most people do not handle light pens well; it takes a lot of experience to use them without distracting the audience. Pencils and pens are too short to be effective; they force you to stand in front of the screen.

16. **Don't Fidget.** Try to stand fairly still and look comfortable. Don't repeatedly check your watch, laugh nervously, wring your hands, or rock. If your nerves show too much, the audience will start to think you're nervous that they'll find the flaws in your research – and start looking harder.
17. **Learn From Other Speakers.** Pay attention to the delivery styles of both good and bad speakers.
18. **Answer Questions Clearly.** Repeat the question so that (1) you can make sure you understood it, (2) to give you time to think, and (3) to make sure the audience heard it. Listen attentively and answer clearly, even if the question was stupid. Do not get defensive and don't judge the questions; senior scientists don't need PhD students to tell them that they asked a “good question”.
19. **Keep Slide Animation Simple.** Lots of jumping, whirling, and flying looks cool ... to teenagers. But it usually looks childish in a scientific talk. Only use animation to improve the message of the talk, for example, to advance a concept one step at a time.
20. **Use Color Cautiously.** The key is to use high contrast, low contrast is very hard to read. Remember that color will look different on different computers, and different when projected. Cognitive scientists claim that dark text on light background is faster to read in print, and light on dark is faster to read when projected. Blue text is especially fuzzy.
21. **Be Yourself.** The most important thing you can do is to be yourself. The above hints and notes are not intended to rework your personality for one talk. You are speaking because you have something important to say, and the people in your audience are there to hear you say it. It is best said simply, casually, and without introducing artificialities.