

# Making Academic Presentations—Effectively!

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*This article excerpts topics from an AERA minicourse in San Francisco. It teaches how to improve the quality of both the content and the delivery of paper presentations.*

Researchers are often skilled at preparing their papers. They are frequently less skilled at presenting them to an audience. Here are five topics from the authors' minicourse that can help researchers become better presenters.

## Understand Your Medium

Perhaps most important in changing the researchers' approach is to help them realize they are working with an entirely different medium. Table 1 contrasts presentation modes.

Speakers, in order to be successful, must acknowledge time restrictions and the listeners' capacity for attention, memory, and on-the-spot processing of critical data. For example, including all the technical details for support or credibility has a reverse impact on listeners: too many details typically obscure, confuse, or clutter the key ideas they are supposed to have promoted!

Your principal concern, as a presenter, is to get the audience involved in you and your topic—and the context of the speech has an impact on how you do that. It might be optimistic to say that as many as 50% are there to hear you, because you're sharing time with up to five other speakers and two critics. Your approach? If you're first, give a little more background on the session's general topic. If you follow others, try to relate your content to theirs. These ideas illustrate how you must be sensitive to audiences if you are to involve them.

Another dimension of sensitivity—helping the audience follow you once you've got their attention—is to provide visuals.

TABLE 1  
Presentations Versus Papers

Your Speech	Your Paper
Listeners	Readers
Journalistic (newspaper) style	Scholarly prose
Medium—words, pictures, delivery	Medium—only words and pictures
Earn audience attention	Readers are committed
Audience interested? You'll know!	No direct gauge of audience interest
One chance to get message across!	Multiple readings are possible
Interactive	Not interactive
You determine audience pace	Reader sets pace
Audience at speaker's mercy for organizing content	Readers can scan a paper to prepare a mindset
Audience feedback can be direct	Audience feedback is remote

## Use Good Visual Aids

Visual aids, either handouts or overheads, can help the audience follow your presentation and recall important aspects of your message. Either format should be well designed.

That means it will likely not be a duplicate of a figure or table presented in the paper [e.g., Don't put in cell sizes for ANOVA unless they are unequal. If you have 10 regression coefficients, indicate only those which (a) are significant or (b) you want to talk about specifically]. Consider these additional suggestions:

- Prepare visual aids in advance.
- Prepare handouts as you would overheads.
- Use the KISS principle.
- Minimize detail—avoid decimals.
- Show patterns—not every piece of data.
- Put your name and presentation title on handouts.

## Managing Your Visuals

- Display aids only when you talk about them.
- Explain visuals to your audience.
- Talk to your audience, not the visual aid!
- Use a marker or highlighter on the overhead to focus audience on key content.
- Practice with overheads in advance.

- Avoid shuffling handouts or transparencies during your presentation.
- Make them accessible to everyone in the audience.
- Make visuals clearly readable.
- Type size for visuals should be

at least this big!

## Design Your Presentation, Not Just Your Paper

Speed reading isn't the answer for cramming 12 typed pages into a 12-minute forum. The information has to be recast for the new medium. Don't be bound by the flow of your paper.

Table 2 describes how the content shifts across the introduction, body, and conclusion of the presentation—depending on the type of study you have: a next-step study that continues a line of inquiry, or a trailblazer study that breaks new ground.

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**TABLE 2**  
Strategies for Presenting Two Types of Research

	Introduction	Body	Conclusion
<p>Content of next-step study: Audience is likely to be familiar with topic</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Get attention</li> <li>2. Give a "teaser" about what was learned (purpose and major conclusion) (Go from new to known)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Say what was done and what it means</li> <li>2. Describe how this differs (what's new?) and how it adds to previous literature</li> <li>3. Focus on the "new," especially the conclusions</li> <li>4. Build credibility by elaborating on soundness of methodology</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review study's conclusions and emphasize relevance.</li> <li>2. Note limitations/caveats</li> <li>3. Suggest possible next steps</li> <li>4. Include affective component to help people remember your work</li> </ol>
<p>Content of trailblazer study: Audience is not likely to be familiar with topic</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Give a teaser—indicate where research fits into prior research</li> <li>2. Build a case: Lead into subject—build logic; give a background</li> <li>3. Give purpose and importance (Go from known to new)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Briefly, give enough details on methods and procedures to establish credibility</li> <li>2. Give conclusions with supportive data (relevant results)</li> <li>3. Describe relevant literature; showing how and why your info/approach is new</li> <li>4. Mention serendipitous findings</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review study's conclusion</li> <li>2. Note limitations</li> <li>3. Emphasize relevance</li> <li>4. Consider next step</li> <li>5. Include affective component to help people remember your work</li> </ol>

For your audience to follow you through your talk, you must

- sift, sort, and outline;
- focus attention: repeat, elaborate;
- choose only data that stimulate interest; and
- insert good transitions, organizers, and summary statements.

Though these guidelines reflect form, not substance, they are still important. You establish your credibility by your content. You can do that only if you communicate your message.

Communicating does not mean "Tell all you know!" Data dumping leads to information overload. No matter what, the audience will/can remember few specifics. You must be selective. To tell more means the audience may absorb less.

Your ultimate goal—communication—will not be achieved.

### Do a Professional Job of Delivering Your Message

Good delivery opens the door to successful communication. And good speaking notes are the key. You will want your audience to recall important points, and be motivated enough to get a copy of your paper.

Speaking notes are *not* 12 pages of paper transposed onto 25 note cards. They are cues, guides. Make notes easy to follow—and big enough to see! Group ideas on a card. Highlight key words for emphasis. Number the cards, in case your jittery hands drop or fumble them. You will glance at—not read from—the speaking notes!

Now you're at the threshold of good communication. You still haven't "opened the door" all the way. It's not just what you say or how you organize it; how you deliver the message impacts what the audience hears. Delivery is both verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

Verbal behaviors include concerns about pace, pause, pitch, vocal variety, and clarity. Make sure the audience can hear and understand your words.

Nonverbal behaviors include your movements, your posture, your facial expressions, your eye contact—or the top of your head if you look down all the time to read notes.

Speaking notes can say "smile," "slow down," "look at audience," and "breathe"! But you can still come off like a robot if you forget our basic premise: A good speech is a planned conversation. It should be extemporaneous.

That means you have to be calm enough when you're "on" to think about what you're doing and saying. Relaxation and breathing exercises can help reduce anxiety before it ruins your presentation. The delivery should be handled with the same ease and enthusiasm as if you were sharing your research with a friend... long distance, day rates, your nickel!

### Manage Question-and-Answer Time to Your Benefit

- Pause. Think.
- Paraphrase the question to ensure that both you and the audience understand.
- Regard a question as an opportunity to clarify ideas or answer objections.
- Meet objections directly.
- Allow people to have different opinions.
- Don't let audience members dominate your time with interchanges amongst themselves.
- Practice saying, "That's an interesting point I didn't think of."
- Practice saying, "I don't know."
- Don't make a speech!

*Our last word? You'll survive!*