Writing a presentation

This resource is designed as a practical guide. It aims to help you write successful presentations. Please note that the emphasis here is on writing – this resource does not cover presentation skills such as body language or voice management.

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This guide forms part of a series of guides for early-career researchers in the School of Technology. It was commissioned by the Department of Chemical Engineering and Biotechnology. Each guide in the series may be downloaded from the Write Your Research website (please see below for the URL). This guide is designed in particular to be used in conjunction with ‘Writing Abstracts’.

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Planning

Writing Your Research: http://writeyourresearch.wordpress.com
Write a plan for your presentation – but keep it simple. Resist the temptation to use complex forms of planning, such as intricate mind maps. Though such forms may be appropriate for other forms of scientific writing, they are difficult to hold in one’s mind during a presentation and difficult to communicate to audiences.

Begin the process of planning by thinking in broad-brush terms. For example, summarise the message of your presentation as if it were a message on Twitter (so with a maximum of 140 characters including spaces). Or imagine your presentation as a turn in a game of darts, where instead of throwing three darts you make three points (and three points only).

A less broad-brush – yet nonetheless readily memorable and communicable – method is the problem-solution string, which is explained in ‘Planning your writing’ (another guide in the Write Your Research series).

**Time: length**

The recommended ratio of words for a presentation to time is 100 words per minute (wpm). Personally, I think that figure is a little on the high side and perhaps encourages presenters to speak too quickly – but 100 wpm is the conventional wisdom.

Build in plenty of ‘wiggle room’. If, for example, you are allotted 15 minutes for your actual presentation, do not write a presentation
that requires as many as 1,500 words. Go for a lower amount – say 1,200. Remember: stuff happens – the previous session over-runs, the computer freezes, etc. Though interruptions take time, they will not usually be a problem if you have built in some wiggle room.

Wiggle room can also be used constructively. If you notice members of the audience looking particularly interested in some part of your presentation, wiggle room allows you to develop that part further by adlibbing. Similarly, if you notice people looking confused, wiggle room gives you time to repeat or supplement the explanation you’ve just given. And if, alternatively, you simply finish a couple of minutes early – nobody ever complains about that!

For reassurance, supplement your plan with a ‘depth chart’. This is a simple diagram setting out what you would do under certain circumstances. (For example, a football manager might have a depth chart to show what would happen if a team’s centre-backs were injured: it would indicate who would substitute and how the team formation might change). What would you do if, for example, you suddenly found you had to cut your presentation by one-third? Or that you had to present your research without slides?

**Writing the text**

One question that arises is whether to read aloud a complete script of your presentation or whether simply to rely on prompts. The former is *not* recommended. However, some researchers do use that method – perhaps because they are extremely nervous, or have
never presented before, or find the demands of communicating in a second or additional language stressful. Some presenters use a mixture of methods – perhaps relying on prompts for most of the presentation but reading a few selected sentences or paragraphs that need to be word perfect.

If you do write a script, don’t write it as if you were writing a journal paper or a report. The eye can take in complex or lengthy sentences much more easily than the ear. Ensure, therefore, that for presentations you use very straightforward syntax. Use the text-to-speech function on your computer to listen to your script. Read each paragraph yourself to ensure that it fits the rhythm and cadence of your own speaking voice.

Rather than writing in complete paragraphs, press ‘return’ after each sentence so that each and every sentence begins on a new line. This will make it much easier for you to follow your text at a glance. And use larger font.

Make the text less concise than you would for a written piece. Building in some redundancies (words or phrases that aren’t strictly necessary from a logical point of view but which help to re-iterate your point): listeners, especially second-language listeners, will find them helpful. In presentations, a little repetition is not necessarily a bad thing.

Writing slides
Scientific and technological disciplines often communicate through visual means – graphs, diagrams, photographs etc. Most likely it will be either necessary or helpful to use slides in your presentation – though do always ask yourself the question, “Do I need slides for this presentation?”

Unfortunately, the use of slides often leads to very poor presentations. Your aim, therefore, should be not to use slides the way most people do (i.e. badly), but rather to use them effectively. If you do this – which, with forethought, need not be difficult – you will at a stroke raise the standard of your presentation well above the average.

The conventional wisdom is that you should use a maximum of one slide per minute. (No, I didn’t say use one slide a minute, I said that was the maximum: you can use fewer – and will surely be rewarded in heaven for doing so!)

Conventional wisdom also says use a maximum (yes, maximum) of 8 lines of text on a slide – or, for a slide presenting a table, 5 rows.

Slides can fulfil three functions, namely:

1. providing the presenter with a script
2. providing a resource for the audience to look at on the screen
3. providing the audience with a print-out to take away.

To outshine everyone else, just remember: The material that you use for these three functions need not be – indeed, should not be – identical
Most presenters fail to recognise this point. As a result, they usually allow function (1) – i.e. providing a script – to dictate the design of the slide presentation, with the result that it will be sub-optimised for the other two functions.

Differentiate your slides according to function. For example, use the on-screen notes function to write prompts to remind you of what you want to say. If you put these prompts in your notes, you won’t need them on your slides: this will allow more empty space on your slides and save your audience from bullet-point-itis. In the printed version, in contrast, you can include more detail than on the on-screen slides – for example, by including full references and URLs.

One final, important, tip: many presenters prepare what they want to say about each slide but forget to prepare the links between slides. This typically produces a clunky experience for the audience similar to riding in a car being driven by someone who is terrible at changing gears. Let me give you an example: the presenter presses the button to bring up the next slide, then glances at the next slide for a prompt on what to talk about; once the presenter sees the prompt, s/he says something clunky (e.g. repeats the title, or says something meaningless or discontinuous such as “Ok, so …”), or (even worse), “Ok, so this next one’s about …”).

So:

Write the links between the slides, not just the slides themselves.
There is a simple way to ensure that you write the links properly: *avoid using main headings on your slides*. Consider: if, for example, as you move from one slide to another, you say something like “Of course, there’s plenty of literature on this topic so I would like now to spend a few moments reviewing the most important pieces of literature” you don’t need to have a heading on the slide saying “Literature review”. Everyone will know it’s a literature review, because that is what you are telling them.

Moreover, if you avoid using main headings, the audience will not feel tempted to read the slides without listening to you – they will automatically recognise that they need to listen to what you are saying. As a result, your presentation will indeed be *yours* – whereas most presenters in effect delegate their presentations to Mr Bill Gates of the Microsoft Corporation.

**Further reading**

There are some good resources on writing presentations. There are holdings of both resources below in university libraries.

Jack P. Hailman & Karen B. Strier, *Planning, Proposing, and Presenting Science Effectively* 2nd ed. (CUP, 2006) – see the chapter on ‘How to present research’. Extensive, perceptive, chapter rooted in advice. Includes posters as well as giving papers. Particularly detailed advice on use of slides and visual resources.