

Conference Presentation Skills Workshop

How to use this document

Here are some guidelines and advice for preparation, planning, content, and delivery of your presentation at the 7th Postgraduate Conference. You might know some of these things already, but we would strongly urge you to read through the document carefully anyway.

For each topic you will find some theory, some tips for you to use in practice where this is appropriate, and finally a checklist with key issues for each topic.

I - Preparation

Theory

- **ROLE OF PREPARATION:** Preparation is the key stage in making a clear and memorable presentation. It does not only mean gathering the material you want to present, though this is obviously important. Take time to plan both the content and structure of your paper.
- **AUDIENCE:** The first thing is to consider the target audience; that is, you need to know whom you will be talking to. At the 7th Postgraduate Conference, please bear in mind that people will be both intelligent and interested in what you have to say (otherwise they would not be attending your session), but they may not be specialists in your area. This means that they may not have expert knowledge of your own discipline, they may not have region-specific knowledge, or they may not be accustomed to the use of statistics and complicated formulae. Please remember this as you work on your presentation.
- **TIMING:** Presenting a paper is not about saying everything there is to know on the topic or everything you know – it is about sharing with your audience the most important issues in a clear and well-structured way. Do not try to include everything from your written paper in the presentation; there is a strict time limit on presentations (at this conference it will be 15 minutes) and the chair of the session will stop you if you run over time.

Practical Tips

1. Look through your material and think about how much the audience will know.
2. **Your spoken presentation is not the written paper!**

Checklist

- ? Have you identified your target audience?
- ? Is the content of your presentation appropriate for the time available?

II - Planning

Theory

- **ROLE OF PLANNING:** Planning is vital to making your presentation a success. Any audience will be able to detect a poorly thought-through piece of work. Take time to structure and target your paper.
- **PRESENTATION FORMAT:** Presentations have a standard format: introduction, main body and conclusion. In the introduction you should outline what you will be talking about. The main body will focus on your arguments, and at the end you should sum up what you have said and make your overall conclusions.
- **STRUCTURE:** Always signal how your paper will be structured. This applies to the whole paper, but also to individual sections of the main body. This will greatly help the audience follow your arguments and make them remember what you want to say! A useful rule is: tell them what you will be telling them about, tell them about it, and then tell them what you have just told them.
- **PRACTISING THE PRESENTATION:**
 - Time yourself speaking aloud: what is 15 minutes when read quietly may take closer to 25 minutes when presented in front of a live audience. Make sure you leave yourself enough extra time (1-2 minutes) to allow for unforeseen circumstances (stress, problems with your visual aids, someone walking late into the room and diverting your attention, etc.).
 - Try to practise your presentation in front of a 'test audience' like friends or family. That way you will become comfortable with the material and familiar with the paper. Don't expect reading in silence will do the trick – you will soon realise that presenting out loud is a very different thing.
- **AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS:**
 - We strongly encourage you to liven up your presentation with the use of audio-visual aids – these may include OHP (overhead projector), transparencies, handouts, sound clips, or anything which will enable you to present an idea or point faster than having to explain it verbally). We strongly hope that PowerPoint facilities will be available.
 - Remember that your aids are there to help, not disturb. If you are not familiar with them, make sure you practise in advance, so they do not distract you from delivering your presentation.
 - You do not need to use elaborate sound effects or fancy animations. Keep it simple, so that people can focus on your argument not the format of your paper. The simplest, clearest visual aids look the most professional.

- If you are using visual aids, do not place too much text on each page – people will focus on reading the text instead of listening to you. Even worse, they may be put off by the amount of information and lose interest altogether.
- *Please note that you will need to prepare your aids before you travel and bring them with you – we will not be able to help you print or prepare them in London. We will provide you with the projectors, but you are responsible for bringing what will go on them.*

Practical Tips

1. Say what you're going to say; say it; then say what you've just said!
2. A useful rule for slides or transparencies is: 1 idea per slide/transparency, 5.6 words per line, 5.6 lines per slide/transparency.
3. Think about what images might work well with the text on your slide. Remember the saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words'.

Checklist

- ? Is your presentation clearly structured? Have you defined what the different sections are?
- ? Have you practised your presentation and made sure it runs to time?
- ? Have you prepared, tested, and (where necessary) printed your audio-visual aids?

III – Content

Theory

- INPUT: Think of your spoken presentation as being based on a written paper on the same topic. The content of the written paper, however, will need to be considerably altered before it can be delivered as a presentation. Do not just read out the written paper, even a shortened version, because that is much harder for the audience to follow.
- STRUCTURE: Make sure that the paper ‘flows’. In other words, it is important that your material is arranged in a well-structured and logical way.
- STORY: Please remember that a presentation is not about mentioning all the relevant arguments and hoping people will be able to work out the common thread. It is your role to put the information in such a way as to form a ‘story’ with a clear message. Presentations with a clear ‘story’ are always the most successful!

Practical Tips

1. Your presentation should sound as if you were speaking naturally. Use shorter sentences than you would if you were writing.
2. To signal your structure, you can use linking phrases like: ‘Now I’m going to talk about...’; ‘At this stage, I want to show that...’; ‘We have just seen that... and now we will also see that...’ – or anything else you can think of!

Checklist

- ? Is the written paper used only as a basis for the spoken presentation?
- ? Does your presentation tell a story with clear messages?

IV – Presentation Delivery

Theory

- **THE PRESENTATION SPACE:** Arrive early for your session. Make sure you already know where it is and how to get there! Once you arrive, check that all your aids and equipment are working properly.
- **CLOTHES:** The way you are dressed will affect how you feel. Some people prefer to dress up to feel more confident, but do not overdo it. Whatever you wear, make sure you feel comfortable in it
- **VOICE & LANGUAGE:**
 - Use simple language and try to avoid jargon. Don't forget that it is likely that some people in the audience will be unfamiliar with terminology from your field/discipline.
 - Pitch your pace to match your audience – don't talk too fast or too slowly. Make sure you talk loudly enough for people at the back to hear you.
 - You will keep people's interest if you sound like you yourself are interested in what you are talking about – remember your voice and body language play a very important role. Varying the tone of your voice, instead of using a monotone, will maintain the audience's attention.
- **BODY LANGUAGE:** Do not turn your back to the audience, hide behind a podium or table, or fold your arms – and do not act if you would rather be anywhere else but where you are now. Instead, try to adopt an open body posture, act naturally, and smile. Maintaining eye contact is the most important way of connecting with the audience.
- **NOTES:** If you use notes, your notes shouldn't be the written paper – they should remind you of the structure of the spoken presentation. Some people like to use small cue cards rather than big sheets of paper. Do whatever is most comfortable for you, but spend most of the time looking at the audience, not at your notes!
- **PRESENTATION STYLE:**
 - There are different presentation styles, depending on the presenter's personality and experience. Don't do things you are not comfortable with. If you prefer to stand in one place, do that. If you feel more at ease walking around, do that instead.
 - Focus on what you are talking about rather than on yourself. If you start worrying about your voice, your hand movements, or so on, you are likely to start feeling self-conscious, getting anxious, and getting lost in your argument. Direct your attention away from yourself as a person and instead focus on your presentation and your audience.

- Using humour can be tricky, especially in a multi-cultural context like an academic conference.

Practical Tips

1. If you are using slides which show the structure of your paper, they might work as your notes as well.
2. Practising the presentation several times before the conference will help you feel much more confident when you actually have to speak.
3. Try to look at different parts of the audience from time to time, including people at the sides and back of the room.
4. If you have an important point that you can't talk about in detail, you can invite the audience to ask you more about it in the question and answer session.

Checklist

- ? Do you know where your session is happening?
- ? Does your presentation fit into the time available?
- ? Have you checked your visual aids work in the presentation room?
- ? Will your voice and body language keep the audience's attention?
- ? Remember your posture, eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice.

V – Question & Answer Session

- In every session there will be a chairperson who will direct the question and answer session. He or she will act as a moderator, stimulating discussion and gathering questions from the audience and in turn passing them onto the panel of speakers
- Being asked questions after the presentation can be difficult. You may already be tired from the presentation. But questions are a good way to explain a point to people if something was unclear. You can also show that you know much more than what you could present in your short paper.
- When a question is being asked, write it down in note format so you remember what you were asked about.
- If you do not understand a question, ask for it to be repeated or rephrased – there is nothing wrong with that.
- Try not to be offended if someone in the audience disagrees with what you had to say.
- Do not worry if you do not know the answer to a question! There is nothing wrong with saying you do not know and offering to get back to the questioner once you have more information.

Practical Tips

1. Make sure you have a piece of paper and a pen with you to write down the questions and ideas for an answer.
2. If somebody disagrees with your presentation, ask them to explain why they feel that way.
3. Think of the question and answer session as a chance to get to know members of the audience who might be useful contacts. Don't think of it as an interrogation!

VI – Additional Points

Dealing with stress and anxiety

- It is natural you will feel nervous before presenting your paper. However, if you are well prepared, know what you want to say and have your notes with you, you will be fine.
- Make sure you relax just before you are about to present – talk to people, read a paper, or whatever helps you to calm down. Then shortly before you start, focus your thoughts on the presentation, take a deep breath, and go.
- Have a glass of water with you to stop your throat getting dry if you feel anxious. Having a sip of water will also give you a chance to ‘catch your breath’.
- If you get lost in your argument, don’t panic. Look at your notes, smile, and restart.

After the Presentation

- Now you can relax!
- Many people immediately focus on their mistakes after they give a presentation. But remember that we tend to be much harsher on ourselves than we need to be. It is very likely that other people will not have noticed that something was not as good as you might have wanted it to be, especially if you have given them clear strong arguments to think about.
- If you’re still worried about how the presentation went, you may find it helpful to ask other people for feedback during a break, and then think about how it will help you do things differently next time. Don’t spend too long thinking about anything that went wrong. Instead, learn from your mistakes and move on.
- If you meet people you want to contact again, try to keep all that information in one place – it will help remind you once you return from the conference. If you’ve agreed to send people anything, such as a copy of your paper, make a note of it – it’s easy to forget!