

Techniques to Hold the Attention of an Audience During a Research Presentation

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Introduction

Many researchers pay little attention to their audience, and so some in audience respond during the presentation by turning their attention to their laptops. One measure of that success is whether the audience will remember the talk's main points. This article suggests ways to prepare a talk and slides for a research presentation that will be remembered. Suggestions here are based on deductive reasoning from analysis of audience reactions to many academic presentations.

How to Prepare Slides that are Effective

Organization of the Talk

The presentation should start with background on the research problem and why the problem is interesting or important. The talk should include what others have done to solve the problem, and how the speaker's contribution differs. Consider starting with an "elevator speech." This consists of the most important ideas that the researcher would want someone to remember if there were only the duration of an elevator ride to convey those ideas. Preparation will consist not of condensing the paper for speech, but rather to extract a few key ideas and explain their importance.

Interestingness

Try to make the presentation interesting enough that people will want to pay attention. To do this, explain why the main ideas or findings are relevant to anyone. Thinking of the ideas as being interesting to anyone will tend to make the speaker explain using language that is less technical [1]. This is especially true in titling the talk, when a more understandable title might fill more seats at the outset. When technical language is necessary, key terms should be defined so that everyone is "on the same page" with the speaker, and accepts the speaker's understanding of the term.

Leave Some Details for Reading the Paper

Describe the method in broad strokes and refer those who want more to examine the underlying paper. A conference talk will not substitute for examining a paper's logical complexity or mathematics in that aural comprehension for detail is less sharp

than when people read for themselves. This is especially true in international conferences where the first language of some in the audience will not be English.

Length of Presentation.

Plan to use only the time it takes to satisfy the audience's need to understand the main ideas. The audience will count it favorably if the talk concludes early. The talk will be considered well planned if the speaker includes everything that he intended at a comfortable pace, allowing time at the end for audience comments.

Slide Content

Many use PowerPoint or a similar software to create the slides that are displayed during the talk. These slides are the slide show because they illustrate what is spoken. So the slides themselves should be sparing of words. Slides are non-essential for public speaking to be effective. Think of a minister who addresses his congregants, or a politician speaking to his constituents.

Slide Amount

In order to calculate the maximum number of slides for the allotted talk time, assume that it will take at least two minutes to deliver each slide. Consider using fewer slides, to give the audience more time to absorb each slide individually. Besides, moving from slide to slide can be mind-numbing for the audience. It is acceptable to include an extra slide to help prove a point, or even to add humor. Keeping your audience in a good humor will lead them to enjoy the talk more.

What Deserves a Slide?

Slides should contain graphics or results that illustrate major points in the talk. If a speaker would take time to write words on a blackboard during the talk, the words are important, but if not, creating that slide might be unnecessary. Given this rubric, it is clear that slides such as "Any questions?" or "Thank you" should be omitted. A speaker can write these as notes just for himself so he will not forget to ask whether there are questions or to thank the audience.

Slide Design

Background color and font typeface should be the same on all slides. It is advisable to choose a font size no smaller than 20 points so that those in the back of the room can read clearly. Surprisingly, it is harder to read words all in capitals, so use both upper and lower case. Alternate slide layout in the sequence if possible, so that, for instance, a comparison side-by-side slide is followed by an image or graph that uses most of the slide area [2].

Every marking on the slide that does not support your argument is a potential distraction [1], so it is preferable not to adopt a logo running across the slide bottom, or to choose a slide template with decorative swirl or graphic across the slide border. Lists within slides can be shown as words stacked vertically without bullet dots. It is not advisable to use bullets because they draw the eye toward themselves and away from the text [3].

Each Individual Slide

The title is each slide's most valuable real estate, so choose a phrase or sentence for the slide image rather than a heading that is general. It has been found that an image on a slide is more likely to be remembered by the audience than a bullet list [4]. If the slide deck for a research talk has enough text to be completely comprehensible in and of itself, audience members will read at times instead of listen to the speaker.

Beginning and Ending Slides

At the beginning of the talk, the speaker should say what he is going to talk about. A generic overview slide is unnecessary (Figure 1). A slide that lists the main point to be covered in each section of the talk, and that is displayed before each section with the next point in boldface, is acceptable because it indicates topic and also timing. The talk should end with main points or summary for the audience to remember. Using the last slide for a non-essential point such as a list of references or call for questions is a visual waste. The speaker can read from notes for himself only if he thinks he might forget to call for questions.

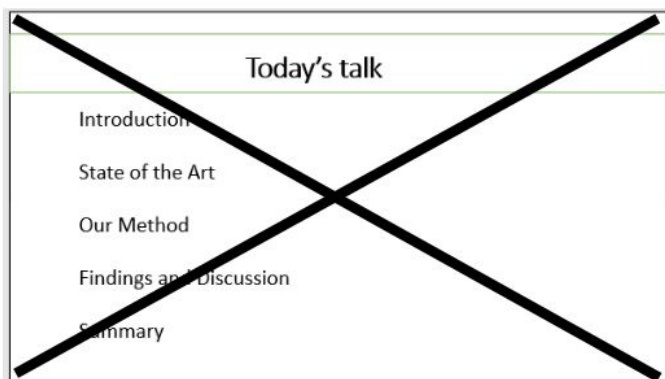


Figure 1: A generic slide with talk overview is unnecessary.

Practice

A speaker would do well to review the slides by actually talking from them in presentation practice, checking for slide content, presentation timing, and transitions between slides. Notes just for himself and not to be displayed to the audience might include the first sentence of the presentation and the last presentation, and possibly some transitions between slides.

How to Present the Slides

Start by Introducing the Topic

It will relax both speaker and audience if the speaker begins by looking into the audience with a smile on his face. The speaker should give a sentence or two of background about the topic, and how this research fits in. This is essentially the elevator pitch, with main ideas to remember. Then he should say how he is going to present those ideas, and launch into a bit of detail.

Read the Words on Each Slide, then Describe the Slide Graphic

Reading the words on each slide is done rarely, and has been dismissed in business as annoying [5]. However, good practice in general is to read the slide title and additional words, if any, and then describe the slide graphic. This is so that the audience members will not be reading the slide to themselves instead of listening to the speaker. It has been found in laboratory experiments that switching attention between looking (reading) and listening slows understanding of each [6].

Interact with the Audience

The audience will tend to pay attention to the speaker if the speaker pays attention to them. For example, the speaker can have a dialogue with the group as a whole: Ask them provocative questions. If someone calls out a comment, the speaker might answer it. It is a good idea to repeat the question. This is for the benefit of those who might not have heard the question clearly, but also for the benefit of the speaker to use extra seconds to consider what to answer.

The speaker might change speaking style temporarily to re-awaken their attention [7]. Raise or lower tone of voice, or talk and then pause. A carefully-planned silence will make some keen to hear a question that is mumbled.

If the Speaker Finds He Is Running out of Time, He Should Skip Slides

He should finish discussing the current slide, and then calmly skip as many slides as necessary until near the end of the presentation. No apology to the audience for skipping slides is necessary; it is professional to finish within the time allotted, and expected. The speaker should retain the final slide that restates main points.

Conclusion

Speakers presenting research can change their style a bit after some of the suggestions in this article to encourage more people to listen. In the future, look at the audience during research presentations to determine which speaking styles hold the audience's attention, and consider adapting techniques that you have noticed are effective.

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