# Presenting Papers

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Below, you will find an overview with practical guidelines for presenting a research paper. The guidelines are not based on official instructions, but on the observations I have made over the years and discussions with colleagues and students. Hence, don't treat them as a formal standard but as a basis to develop your own style in presenting your work in public.

## The Purpose

Speaking in public is a performance. It is a performance in service of your message. *The purpose is to get your message across to the audience.* Your words, your body language and the aids you use (like a power-point presentation or a piece of chalk) are the means to that end. To perform is to play a role, but remember always to play yourself (that is the character you know best).

Hence, do not think of a presentation as a test or an exam, but as an opportunity to share your thoughts with a wider audience.

## Preparation

Though you should use only keywords as notes during your speech, it is fine to prepare your presentation in writing in order to get the contents right and also for reasons of timing. By writing down your argument, you can test what is needed to explain it well. It is very likely that you have to leave out many interesting sections of your research paper. On average people speak at a speed of a 100 words per minute. So, if you are allowed to speak for 10 minutes, your text should be no longer than 1,000 words (i.e., 2,5 pages). This means that a research paper of 4,000-6,000 words can be covered in part only. *Dare to be selective!* It is better to make one point clear than to cover many points superficially.

If you use power-point, please avoid some very common mistakes:

1. Often there is much too much information on one slide. Use the slides only to highlight important aspects of your argument and to

illustrate what you are saying. It may be helpful to show a particular definition or hypothesis. But in general, the texts you show will distract your audience from what you are saying: they stop listening and start reading the slide. If you use long texts nevertheless, show it piece by piece, keeping track with your oral presentation.
2. Often the slide-show takes over from the speaker. This can happen in two ways: a) if there are many slides, the speaker seems merely to comment on them (think of boring evenings where friends show their holiday pictures); b) The slides appear to be the notes of the speaker: s/he reads them out and then turns to the next slide. In both cases the argument tends to be reduced to bullets with one-liners – nuance gets lost.
3. Often there are typing errors on slides. This looks stupid and is easy to avoid.

Once you have written down the complete text, mark the keywords that will help you to reproduce it by heart (optimal flexibility is achieved by working with mind-maps). Practice your presentation by talking loud, preferably in front of a mirror or some friends, so you can check out what you do with your hands and arms while speaking, whether you move too much or stand like a statue, and most of all if the timing is correct. Check out if your power-point presentation can be read from a distance (use the right fonts and colours). Be conscious of the clothes you will wear during your presentation. Generally, in academic circles dress-codes are fairly loose and liberal, but make sure you feel comfortable and appropriately dressed for the occasion.


The Beginning and the End

The presentation begins the moment you are called to the fore. The presentation ends the moment you are back on your seat again. In other words, as soon as and as long as the eyes of the audience are on you, you have to perform your role. Everything is part of your presentation: the way you walk to podium, the way you try to get your power-point presentation started or your microphone working, the way you deal with the response from the audience (whether applause or booing), the way you walk back to your seat.

Take a good look at the meeting room (or conference room) before the meeting starts: check out where you will stand, estimate how loud you will have to speak to reach the back rows (both speaking too low and too loud must be avoided – it will annoy your audience), check if the computer and the beamer work, etcetera. If necessary, make sure there is a

glass of water (but: Never drink in front of the audience directly from a bottle).

The moments of a presentation best remembered by an audience are the beginning and the end. Therefore, make sure that you always know what your first introductory lines will be, and what your closing lines will be. This will also help you to feel at ease and self-assured: you know how you will start and end, irrespective of what happens in between.

## During the presentation

*Some tips about speech:*
- Practice the speed and volume at which you wish to talk. If you speak too slow or too fast, you will lose your audience. Too slow is boring, too fast is incomprehensible. Do not speak monotonously. Don't speak too loud, but speaking too soft is even worse. Be aware of acoustics and group size: adjust speech speed and volume to the circumstances.
- Do not be afraid of pauses in your speech. Use the rhetorical power of silence. Pauses may give the audience time to digest what you're saying, and they may help you step over to the next argument.
- Most of us are struggling with a foreign language, sometimes called 'international English'. Keep investing in your passive and active language skills. Note that people from different countries, towns and districts put different emphases to the same words - this is also true for native speakers ('you say tom[a]to, I say tom[ee]to'). Therefore make sure that key terms in your presentation as well as the names of authors, politicians etc. you mention are well understood – e.g. by writing them down.
- Practice difficult jargon. Words like 'interdependence', 'securitization', 'epistemology', 'intergovernmentalism', 'Europeanization' or 'neo-liberal institutionalism' should come fluently from your lips.
- If you get a question, take time for your answer. Do not interrupt the questioner.
- Time management is essential. Make sure that you are always in control of time. Put a watch in front of you (or look around if there is a clock on the wall you can look at) and keep track of the time you take per issue. Both talking too long and talking too short is wrong. Too long: you will annoy your public and your chairperson. Too short: you give the impression that you do not know much so say about your subject or do not deem it very important yourself.

Some tips about body language:
- Look at the audience as much as possible. Very often speakers turn their back to the audience and are talking to the projection screen or to the

black board. Or they may be focused on the flat-screen of the computer in front of them, or on the lecture notes they keep in their hand. This way you will never get your message across.

- Be not concerned about your appearance during your presentation. It is good to think about how to use your hands, where to stand, if you should walk or not etcetera before and after the presentation, but *not during the presentation*. Be natural and spontaneous, as if you are with good friends. Thoughts about how to act will distract not only your own attention, but very often the audience picks up the signals and switches attention from message to messenger. So even when your neck turns red and you feel cold sweat on your back, welcome this as extra adrenaline that will help you reach the audience.

- Still a few things need to be avoided: do not put your hands in your pockets; do not pick your nose; do not run your hand through your hair; do not wiggle with your body; do not move too much but don't be a statue either.

- If there is a discussion after your presentation, consider to step away from your desk and come closer to the audience. That way, you look more open for criticism, i.e. less defensive.


Contact with the Audience

Never read your presentation from paper. Nine out of ten speakers lose their audience within minutes if they read out their text. On rare, very official occasions it may be obligatory or customary to present a speech from paper. Speech writing requires special skills, not dealt with here. Normally, when you present research results you can speak freely, choosing the words that seem appropriate at the time. In principle, this makes the presentation lively and gets the public more involved: you are really talking to them. Talking freely also allows you to adjust your timing to the circumstances: if you need more time on one issue than expected, you can cut the next one short. The only support you need, are the keywords you noted down for yourself to remind you of the line of argument you intend to make.

In general there are three steps in order to get your message across:

1. *The audience must be able to understand <u>every word</u> you say.*
So, concentrate on the people in the back of the room. Can they hear you, can they see you, can they read the information on your slides?

2. *The audience must be able to understand <u>the content</u> of your argument.*

Obviously, your speech needs to be well structured. There needs to be a clear story line. Look into the eyes of your audience if they are with you on every step you take (and ask them so in case you're in doubt).

*3. The audience must be <u>enriched</u> or even <u>convinced</u> by your argument.* Part of your role is to really belief that what you are saying is highly relevant and thought-provoking. This does not mean that you are playing a salesman, a pr-officer, a priest or a politician. But be aware that very often an audience catches unexpressed thoughts and feelings (so-called "inner speech"): if you doubt the relevance of what you are saying, the audience will doubt it too; if you are focused on the way you act rather than the message, the audience will focus on the messenger rather than the message. Try to make them enthusiastic for the intellectual adventure you experienced during your research – as if you just turned home from an exiting journey.

<u>Finally</u>

There is a fair chance that reading and thinking about 'how to present' will kill things you did intuitively right so far. Normally this is only a temporary setback. The more you practice, the sooner you will develop a self-conscious yet pleasant way of presenting your work.