

OPINION

Presentation 101

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It is a rarity in medicine to never give a presentation in one form or another; although it is common to sit through presentations of varying quality. Having had the experience of giving presentations and sitting through many over the years, it is always a pleasure to listen to a presentation that has been carefully thought out, and giving such a presentation can be accomplished with some simple considerations.

Presentations take many forms: short 10 minute platform presentations where you present your research, longer 30 minute sessions designed for continuing education (perhaps focusing on a particular case), or 45-50 minute “Grand Rounds” presentations, where you are expected to discuss a topic in detail. The success of your presentation in large part depends on how well prepared you are. There are two basic elements to most presentations: what you say, teach or demonstrate, and, more importantly, what the audience hears and learns. There is much more that goes into the production of a presentation and this paper will act as a tool for the beginner, to know what to expect and to perform successfully.

Preparation prior to arrival

I. Familiarize yourself with your audience

As you prepare, it is essential to have some knowledge of whom you will be addressing. Short platform presentations are usually discipline-specific, but for longer presentations, inquire about the make-up of the audience to ensure your presentation is suitable. If the audience has a mixture of disciplines and specialties, your presentation should be more general but stimulating enough to capture the attention of those who may not be familiar with your particular field, specialty, or topic. If the audience is a highly specialized one, your talk can be more detailed and technical. Having sat through presentations where only a handful in the audience can follow the talk, I can attest that it can be difficult to hold the attention of an audience if the content is too complex. While it should be necessary for organizers to inform speakers about the audience, this can be avoided by reaching out in advance to tailor your presentation appropriately.

If invited to give a named presentation, conduct appropriate background research. It is important to know whether the person the presentation is named after is deceased or alive (and in the audience) or if family are present. You may know the individual personally and would be expected to say something complimentary. If not, say “I never had the opportunity to meet Dr. _____

but I understand she...” It is always much appreciated to attend a named presentation where the speaker acknowledges the individual.

As an invited guest, it may be appropriate to say something positive about the community or institution, but if you cannot think of a compliment, do not make a negative comment especially about the weather. The organizers have no control over the weather, and remember, the audience has chosen to live in the community and don’t want someone from “away” criticizing it.

If asked for a curriculum vitae (CV) to be used for introductory purposes, unless specifically stated, send a brief CV for introduction highlighting your relevant credentials and achievements. The audience is unlikely to be interested in a lengthy detailed list of accomplishments and publications.

II. Preparing a slideshow

It is rare to see a medical presentation that does not include PowerPoint. When well done, the PowerPoint should supplement and enhance your presentation. Poorly done, it distracts from your message. The following are a few of the most amenable errors:

- Too many slides for the time allotted. This usually causes the presenters to speed up towards the end. You suspect this is happening when with 5 minutes remaining the presenter says: “I think we will skip the next few slides.” If these slides are important enough to include in your presentation, ensure that you will have time to go over them. If they are not important, it is advisable to omit them from the presentation; if you are left with extra time, it may be more valuable to allow more questions or discussion with the audience.
- Massive figures that no one can read or understand in the time allowed. This is usually accompanied by the speaker apologetically saying “now this is a very busy slide and I know you won’t be able to read and take this in but . . .” Try and take the time to simplify complex figures, both for your benefit and the benefit of the audience.
- Colors can be tricky. You can’t go wrong with black, white, and blue. For example, black or white text on a pale blue background or simply black text on a white background. Greens, reds, and yellows may look fine on your laptop but do not always project well onto a big screen.
- Spelling mistakes. You can get away with a few spelling mistakes, but when numerous, poor spelling

tells the audience that only you have reviewed the slides. Enlist the help of a critical friend to review your slides with you and give you helpful feedback.

- Too many lines of text on the slide. This can be distracting, especially when the font is too small for the audience to easily read. Four to five bullet points per slide is usually sufficient, and it is advisable to elaborate on succinct points rather than summarize long points.

III. Choosing your outfit

Your attire should match the formality of the presentation. Most national and international meetings require a suitably professional appearance; often business attire is appropriate. For a local presentation, the dress can be more informal. Shorts and sandals are never appropriate.

Setup for your presentation

I. Podium and computer logistics

If you are using the organization's laptop, it will be connected to the projector. If you bring your own, you need to not only connect the power cord, but make sure you can connect to the projector. It helps to be knowledgeable about adjusting the lighting in the room (for major conferences this will be done for you). You may need to dim the lights for some images such as radiographs or microscopy. Be sure to turn your cell phone off prior to the presentation, and if at home, give your pager (beeper) to a colleague. If there is a prior opportunity to check out the room, use it to view the podium, lighting, projector, and seating.

The podium is usually used to mount a microphone and place a laptop (when PowerPoint is used). It may also provide a home for wires, cables, or controls for the sound system. The controls may be pre-set and, unless you are familiar, you would be advised to keep hands off. If you are concerned that you might not be able to see beyond the podium, or be seen behind the podium, there are two options. Ideally you would be able to request a small step, and if that is not available you may adjust the microphone and present beside the podium. This should be a last resort because although you may be able to reach your laptop to advance the slides, it will be difficult for you to see the laptop screen.

II. Microphone – setup and familiarizing

If used properly, the microphone is a valuable tool for amplifying and projecting your voice to the entire audience. Microphones may be attached to the podium (and usually adjustable), placed on a stand (when used for audience participation), sitting on a table (when used

for panels), or designed as a lapel microphone (clipped to a collar). Ensure that the microphone is appropriately placed to best amplify your voice to the audience. Ideally, it should be at an appropriate height and position so that you can speak directly into it with ease. Make the necessary adjustments before starting your presentation. Lightly tapping the microphone will tell you whether it is turned on. If you use your hands a lot, be mindful of microphone placement so you do not accidentally bump into it. When presenting as part of a panel, you may have to share a microphone with an adjacent colleague. When it is your turn to speak, slide the microphone in front of you rather than leaning across your speaking partner. If you turn to look at a screen or an audience member, always ensure that your microphone moves with you so that your voice does not cut out. If you are a wanderer, use a lapel microphone unless you are a skilled presenter and can carry the microphone in your hand (best left to singers). For more informal and usually smaller audiences, there is rarely a microphone. In this case, it is imperative that your voice carry and there are no competing distractions such as air conditioners, traffic, etc. Occasionally a presenter will begin by asking the audience “do I need to use a microphone?” Some presenters have a clear voice that projects well but most should take advantage of the microphone unless the room is very small. If you are prone to a dry mouth when speaking, bring water since it may not be available. Be careful where you place it, as accidents do happen and you should ensure that water can't be spilled on your laptop.

It is strongly recommended you practice your presentation, several times if necessary, and if a novice, seek the assistance of someone with prior experience.

During your presentation

I. Delivery

As you start your presentation, it is preferable to look at and address the audience with a few introductory remarks before your first slide. This may be to tell the audience what you are going to talk about or to thank the organizers for the invitation. It is becoming a necessity for speakers to declare conflicts with the content of their presentation. This should be followed by a list of your objectives. At the end of your presentation, you may return to demonstrate that you have completed them.

During your presentation, there are three places you can look as you stand behind the podium - the laptop, the audience, and the screen (often partly behind you). The best presentations use a combination of all three. Experienced presenters speak without reading text from the laptop. This allows them more time to look out into the room and gives the impression they are engaging the audience. One must know their subject well to do this successfully. It is important to avoid reading directly

from your slides, when possible, to complement your presentation and keep the audience engaged with what you are saying. If you are going to turn to look at the screen, adjust the microphone or have one attached to your lapel.

The members of the audience, unless asleep, have mainly two places to look – at you and the screen. As you put up each consecutive slide, they will look at the screen and listen to what you have to say.

II. Humor

Stick to the topic to avoid getting side tracked. If you want the audience to know that you have a sense of humor, there may be an opportunity for a light or witty comment, but this is not comedy central so do not overdo it. It may appear to the audience that you are not taking your subject seriously, and the audience will not take you seriously. Comedy is never appropriate during a 10 minute platform presentation.

III. Timing

You must keep track of the time. Some podiums have a built-in clock or timer. If not, use your own watch. Some presenters do not want to glance at their wrist during their presentation and set their watch on the podium next to the laptop. If you are giving a 10 minute platform presentation, the organizers mean 10 minutes, not 12 or 15 minutes. If you go over your allotted time, you are at risk of the chair stopping you in mid-sentence, thanking you and opening for questions. Longer presentations, such as 45 minutes, usually allow 10-15 minutes for questions and discussion. Both you and the audience will benefit from ensuring enough time is left for questions and discussions about your topic.

Overhead announcements on hospital PA systems can be distracting. The audience will be listening to the message in case it is a fire or cardiac arrest. Rather than competing with the PA, pause until the announcement is over.

Your presentation should not be a race. If you speak fast in normal conversation, you may have to slow down. Some novices, when nervous, speed up during a presentation and a 45 minute talk is finished in 25 minutes. The benefit in this case is that more time is available for questions and discussion. If only one question is asked, the presentation is over. If you are giving a presentation in something other than your first language, it may be difficult for you to be understood if you speak quickly. The tendency for upspeak, ending each statement as if it were a question, should be avoided. Instead, ensure that you speak confidently and be mindful of your inflections, allowing a pause at the end of each sentence.

Advancing slides can be done with the touch of a

laptop or using a remote device which may have a built-in laser pointer. Directing the attention of the audience to a particular point on the screen requires you to use the mouse on the laptop or a laser pointer. Don't assume the organizers will provide a laser pointer. Bring one with you and avoid the embarrassment of leaving the podium (and microphone) and walking over to the screen and pointing with your finger.

For figures, always introduce your slide. For example, "on the vertical (or y axis) is the weight in kg and on the horizontal (or x axis) is the age in years." Then tell the audience what you want them to take away from the figure. Remember, you have seen the figure many times but it is a first for the audience.

IV. Answering audience questions

The chair or coordinator may provide the direction for the discussion, but occasionally you will have to. Be prepared for the following:

- Difficulty in hearing a question. If the audience member has no microphone, or you can hear the question but most of the audience cannot it is a good idea to repeat the question before replying.
- Not remembering the last part of a question asked by a colleague or audience member. It is a good idea to answer the last question first, and then ask the audience member to repeat the first part of the question.
- Audience members who want to comment and not ask a question. A reply may not be necessary or just a simple "thank you for your comment." If you completely disagree with the person, you may feel the need to respond but do so briefly. If necessary, just say "we will have to disagree on that." The audience is rarely interested in a prolonged debate between two individuals that uses up all the discussion time. If there is little time for questions, there may be an opportunity for you to remain after the presentation to answer questions particularly from those members who are shy about speaking in front of a large group.

In my experience, some of the best presentations have been given by junior members who have taken the time to practice and polish their performance. It is a pleasure to witness a well-done presentation. It sends a message that the presenter is well prepared, speaks clearly, stays on time, and is respectful of the audience's time. Good luck.