

Making the most of your Research Symposium paper presentation

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I am glad the you are here this evening to think about how to make the most of your Research Symposium paper presentation. For some of you, this will be your first research paper presentation, while for others you may have already made presentations for Research Symposium or at other research meetings, but in any case, I want to visit about some things to think about when planning, preparing and practicing your presentation. This is not a comprehensive coverage of this topic. We are only going to spend about 20 minutes talking about how to plan and present your paper, with our objective of better understanding the process for making excellent short research presentations.

Planning your oral presentation

- Discipline specific talk—Know your discipline format—Many online resources are available
- Organize by: Intro; Problem/Question/Hypothesis; Study Approach; Methods; Results; Summary/Conclusions; Acknowledgments
- Tell as a story versus a journal for better flow
- Focus—Less can be more—Focus on your central message
- Technical terms okay, but not jargon
- Provide info in visual form
- Don't just read your slides, be a reporter/commentator



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Different disciplines organize and present their short paper presentations in different discipline-specific formats or styles. To learn what format or style your discipline uses, consult your faculty, fellow students or discipline association or society website.

For many disciplines, organizing your talk as a story rather than a journal article works best. In the story format, after the introduction and problem/question/hypothesis statement, the methods-results are combined and walked through in a logical manner. This format keeps the methods from being disjointed from the results for a particular experiment or research section.

Research projects can be complex and convoluted. To help your audience better understand your research, focusing on a limited central message can help. Logical organization of the progression of the research goes a long way in helping your audience understand your work.

Because the Research Symposium is organized across broad subject areas such as biological, physical or social sciences, it is likely that some in your audience may not be familiar with the specialist terms that you use. To help those not in your specific specialty understand you, it is always good to define terms that you think your audience may not be familiar with. However, jargon, like slang terms, should be avoided.

For most paper presentations, the visual images used in your slides will help your audience better understand what you are talking about. Your visuals should be large enough to be seen from the back of the room and readily recognizable. When using graphs, make sure that your axes have labels and that these are large enough to be seen.

Finally, don't just read your slides to the audience. They can read these themselves. Your

job as a presenter is to enlarge and amplify what the audience can see on your slides. Your job is to be a “reporter” of what you have done and provide a “commentary” on what it means. For slides with graphics, you will want to walk your audience through each graphic.

Preparing your presentation slides

- One slide per 0.5-2 minutes
- As you speak the audience will try to figure out what you are saying from your viewing your slides
- Engage visually, but don't overwhelm or distract from you talking
- More visual less text
- Use **Large font**
- Don't use visuals not easily recognized or distracting



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You will see sources say that you should allow anywhere from 30 second to 2 minutes per slide. Why the variation? More complex slides take longer for the audience to comprehend and longer for you to explain. When you are putting together your presentation, time how long it takes to explain a slide and the sum of those times tells you how many slides you can use for your 12-15 minute Research Symposium presentation.

In any case, leave enough time for your audience to figure out what your slide is showing them and what you are telling them. Don't rush! When you practice your presentation, if you find yourself having to rush to stay under the time limit, then simplify and refocus your talk to be able to complete it without rushing.

View your slides from the back of the room to see if you can read the axis labels, and whether the font colors are distinct enough to be readily read.

Slides with too much text distract from the propose of the slide which is to help your audience understand what you are saying visually, not to replace you and to be a complete presentation by themselves.

I can't overemphasizing using large enough font to be easily read from the back of the presentation room.

Lastly, the images on the slide should be easily recognizable such that these do not require extra time to be explained, otherwise they are a distraction rather than an aid.

Practicing & presenting your talk

- Break your talk into logical sections to practice
- Work on each section, identify difficult parts needing more practice
- Practice “looking” forward (at audience, not projection screen)
- Ask your advisor or fellow students to listen and critique your talk



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A 12 to 15 minute talk is best learned in sections, typically, slide by slide or section by section, e.g., introduction, research question, problem or hypothesis, etc.

As you practice, you will identify sections which are more difficult to explain. Take more time to learn these sections and explain them smoothly.

Practice “facing your audience” rather than your computer or projection screen showing your Powerpoint. This will help you develop good eye contact and connectivity with your audience when you are actually presenting your paper.

Most importantly, ask your advisor or students in your program to listen to your talk and provide suggestions on ways to improve your presentation. They can often identify sections that need additional work to make them understandable.

Answering questions

- Repeat the question back to the questioner
- Take time to formulate your answer
- If you don't know the answer, say "I don't know the answer to your question"
- If you think that you have a reasonable speculation— identify it as such and answer



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Facing questioning can be scary, but it doesn't have to be. The first thing to do is to make sure that you understand what the questioner is asking. It is too easy to not listen to the entire question before starting to formulate your answer. This often leads to a=not answering the question that was asked. One way to avoid doing this is to state the question back to the questioner. This will give the questioner the opportunity to clarify the question, and you the opportunity to think about your answer. Stating the question back also allows your audience to hear the question again, in case they did not hear it clearly the first time.

Take time to think about how to answer the question. This is not a race to see how many questions you can answer, but a time for the audience to interact with you about your presentation. A good answer following some thought is much better than a quick response that misses the mark.

In any case, please don't try to answer a question that you don't know the answer to. If you don't know the answer, just say so. An honest response of "I don't know the answer to your question" is much better than a contrived answer which is incorrect.

However, for questions that are speculative, it is okay to say "I don't know the exact answer to your question, but if you allow me to speculate ...".

Presentations Do's and Don'ts

- Do format your talk along discipline “norms”—see online resources
- Do focus your talk using a story format rather than a journal format
- Do use technical words with explanations, but not jargon
- Do use your visuals to help the audience understand what you are telling them
- Do break your talk into logical sections to practice so that it flows
- Do have others listen to you present and make suggestions to improve your talk
- Do repeat questions for clarity, take time for thoughtful answers, don't try to answer questions if you don't know the answer
- Do “dress for success”, smile and engage—you know your topic better than anyone—help your audience understand it too!

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Here is a summary of some of the things that we have talked about. With that, I'd like to answer your questions.