Talking points

Presenting at a conference is a unique opportunity to broadly communicate your work. Here are ten suggestions to make the most of it.

"I know this is a busy slide, but…"
"You probably can't see this, but…"
"I'm gonna go through these last slides really quickly…"

As editors, we attend many conferences. Having already heard these staples too many times this year, we decided to put together our top 10 list of presentation rules. We may not address an audience often, but we have plenty of opportunity to build up our pet peeves about presentation skills.

There is of course more elaborate advice available, and this short list may sound like common sense to many. Nevertheless, we hope it helps beginner speakers get off on the right foot for the summer meeting season. Perhaps even some seasoned speakers may appreciate the reminder.

1. Plan for the allotted time. There are few things more annoying than a speaker who rushes through slides without leaving any lasting impression about the substance of the work. The key to a good presentation is to present the minimum amount of information that is necessary to make your point. A maximum of one slide per minute is a good rule of thumb, but the exact number should be determined by rehearsing.

2. Know your audience. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all speech. Knowing the level of specialty and diversity of your audience will help determine how much background and detail you need to present. Do not expect everyone to be an expert in your particular body of work but avoid patronizing the audience.

3. Define your goals. As you must limit your material, it is important to deliberately decide which points you want the audience to remember. Once this is clear, build your talk around these points and make sure that each slide has a purpose toward your goals.

4. Structure your talk. Whatever the audience, it is worth setting the stage by stating the general importance of the work and your specific objectives. To place the work in perspective, mention related efforts and what is unique about your approach. Only then, delve into experiments and results. An outline slide at the beginning is seldom necessary for short talks but it can help if you will be discussing substantially distinct topics. In contrast, there is no way around the summary slide—the all-important 'take-home message'—which should capture the key points in a way that both experts and nonspecialists will remember.

5. Keep your slides simple (content). The slides should be a visual support for your talk rather than the talk itself; they should help convey the essence of your talk rather than the details. Prefer bullet points to paragraphs of text. Avoid complete sentences because the audience will not resist reading them, creating a distracting disparity with what you are actually saying. Such economy of text means you must choose the words judiciously, making sure you highlight key notions. Prefer schematics and cartoons to words but keep them simple, limiting them to the essential elements. Finally, prefer graphs to tables, and label them adequately.

6. Keep your slides simple (design). There is nothing wrong with a good old solid background and an appropriate color contrast. Use a legible typeface for all text (do not forget about cartoon labels and graph axes) and make it large enough to be legible once projected. If you have to resort to a font size below 20 points, you have too much information on your slide. Sans-serif fonts (in which letters do not have 'little tails') tend to work best.

7. Beware of animations and multimedia. There are cases in which a simple schematic animation will convey a concept better than a still cartoon. But think twice and use animations sparingly as they can be awfully distracting if overused. As for dynamic data representations, such as live microscopy movies or rotating three-dimensional protein structures, they can be invaluable to convey critical observations. Our advice, however, is to keep them to a minimum and make sure they run properly. If you are using someone else's computer, chances are the movie will not play. So do not plan your talk around it, or else, have a contingency plan such as a few slides with representative still frames.

8. Watch your delivery. Be attentive to the speed and volume of your speech. If you are a non-native English speaker, pay particular attention to the pronunciation of key terms and use words on the slide to convey key concepts. If you are a native English speaker, keep in mind that many in the audience are not. In addition, using transition words and phrases between slides will help

make the talk flow smoothly. To use them effectively, you must know which slide is coming up next.

9. Choose your words. Avoid jargon and acronyms. Uncommon abbreviations cannot always be avoided on the slides, but it is important to spell them out as you speak. As much as possible, match key words in your speech to the written words on your slides to maximize the visual support they offer. Explain the graphs and schematics as soon as you bring up a slide. If people do not know what is plotted against what, or what the red arrow is supposed to represent, they will not follow your explanation of the results.

10. Rehearse! Most of the points above will become apparent if you give a practice talk. With or without a friendly audience, the key to rehearsal is to make it real. Problems with timing, abrupt transitions and confusing explanations will become obvious only if you try it 'out loud' and not in the comfortable environment of your own head. Some oral presentation instructors film their students giving mock talks in class—a potentially excruciating experience but one that is very informative about bad habits. For a real talk, practice runs will give you the opportunity to fix problems in the presentation design and to keep track of time effectively during the talk. Practicing is also the only proven way to reduce anxiety.

This is our advice, for what it is worth. Perhaps there is one more pet peeve that sums up all the others: do not make excuses for things you could have addressed before your talk. If you have prepared well, you will do a great job.