

Delivering strong conference presentations A guide for first-time presenters

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This document aims to provide some advice on how to deliver a good presentation. Achieving this rather difficult task will vastly improve the reach of your work, research and profile. You don't want somebody to feel tired or bored by your presentation as this may reflect negatively on you.

A lot of people attending academic conferences do not read the actual papers but only watch your presentation, so do not underestimate the importance of delivering it well. That your paper was accepted for a conference is commendable, but do not assume that the presentation is just an obligation or 'necessary evil'.

A good presentation will make you and your work memorable and invite useful feedback on your work. The last thing you want is to get no response or to receive questions that seem very basic or unnecessary. You should aim to get questions challenging your argument, rather than seeking clarification on what you are doing.

This brief document is divided into three parts: i) before; ii) during; and iii) after the presentation.

I. BEFORE THE PRESENTATION

Most of the work needs to be done at this stage. Imagine that your presentation is a house - without solid foundations, your work will be weak.

So you need to prepare well before you even arrive at the conference venue. You do not want to lock yourself in your hotel room on arrival and try to prepare the presentation at the last minute. This should be avoided for mainly two reasons:

- a. The key benefit of attending a conference is meeting people, networking and exchanging ideas on your work. What's the point of attending a conference and meeting only the three to four people of your panel? You should try to take part in the various activities on offer and not worry about your presentation taking place next morning.
- b. Preparing your presentation in a hurry is always bad practice. You may forget something crucial, miss spelling errors, the computer may not work, you might lose your USB stick or have no internet access in your room... the list is endless. Any work done in a panic is of much poorer quality than work under normal conditions.

The presentation can take many forms (most popularly, PowerPoint; slides or handouts). But whatever your format, any presentation has

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to discuss the following:

- The question of your paper
- The argument of your paper
- The supporting evidence for your argument
- Conclusions

The above list should also be reflected in your paper. If your paper is not structured as such, it is a great opportunity for you to try to work on improving it further by being very clear about what you do in your research. Please find below some brief comments about each bullet point.

Question: it should always be a question – i.e. end up with a question mark. Avoid vague titles or just the theme of your work. If your paper is titled ‘Economic policy in Greece’ then you probably need to revise your question. This example can mean anything and nothing (which period? which policy exactly – monetary, fiscal, incomes?). To help your audience, you need a clear, well-defined question. As an example, this title could be reformulated as: ‘How can we understand Greece’s economic policy between 1980 and 2010? The case of state enterprises’. Ideally, we want questions of why instead of how/what so we can ask the question this way: ‘Why Greece’s economic policy between 1980 and 2010 failed to promote convergence with Europe?’. Notice how much more specific this question is compared to the original one. Your audience should not have to work out what you are trying to say – it is YOUR job to make very clear what your paper is about, and failing to do so will result in confusion.

Argument: What is the main point of your paper? There should only be ONE, and it should answer your question. Make sure that you avoid boring and useless literature reviews – we know the field already, as this is not a classroom but a research conference. Most people are academics and know the key bibliography. What is YOUR argument that contributes something new to the existing literature? For example, instead of telling us what Papandreou, Mitsotakis, Simitis etc. did (we know what they did – unless you have uncovered something that is not yet known) you should try to explain why they did it. If we take our model question from the previous paragraph, some plausible arguments can be: ‘Greece was too poor to catch up’; ‘Greece never bothered to catch up’; ‘Europe did not try to help Greece to converge’; ‘Europe did not want Greece to converge’. These arguments are very simplistic, but they are used in order to give an idea of what we mean by ‘argument’. You should always answer your question – do not allow any room for confusion as to what you are arguing.



“Your audience should not have to work out what you are trying to say – it is your job to make very clear what your paper is about”

Supporting evidence: Why your analysis/opinion/answer is correct. Here you need examples, sources, and events (but not too many – we all know the events; we came to hear your analysis and argument). It is here where you can have some historical analysis of facts, but keep it short and to the point.

Conclusions: What is your argument (again) and why is it correct? What are the implications of your analysis? What does it mean that you argued X, Y, Z? What is your contribution to the literature?

POWERPOINT

A common flaw witnessed in many conferences is to have poor slides. Below we will discuss some key errors in PowerPoint slides.

1. Having a whole paragraph or a normal text must be avoided at all costs. Nobody reads a page on a slide; and if you have 'packed' slides, the audience will fall asleep after one minute or start checking their phones and laptops.
2. You need to have only the key messages – three or four bullet points with a maximum of one sentence in each one. The slides are for the audience, not for you. If you cannot remember what to say exactly or feel uncomfortable talking in English, also have your own personal notes you can read from. Yet it is advisable not to turn a presentation into a reading exercise (see also below part II on presentation delivery).
3. Spice it up: include tables, graphs, a photo, etc.

Examples of poor and good slides

A poor slide: the audience cannot read this and will quickly lose its interest

- In 1993, the European Commission published its 'White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment', which intended to strengthen the EU's competitiveness as well as its social dimension, largely as a counterweight to EMU, seeking to ensure a balance between competitiveness and social solidarity (Goetschy, 1999, Arnold and Cameron 2001). In essence, it sought a coupling between non-inflationary policies, which were required to meet the Maastricht criteria, and employment-promoting policies through a combination of supply-side and Keynesian policy proposals.³⁵ Despite sometimes fierce opposition by member states, which obstructed or delayed its implementation (Goetschy 1999, Trubek and Mosher 2003, Regent 2003), the White Paper was an important catalyst for bringing the issue of employment policy at the centre of the European agenda (de la Porte 2002).
- A combination of pro-European and social democratic actors in the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament, along with the strong support of Sweden (which joined the EU in 1995) and UK's relatively pro-European stance under New Labour, achieved the formal adoption of the European Employment Strategy (EES) in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997).

Source: Monastriotis, V. and Zartaloudis, S. (2010) 'Beyond the crisis: EMU and labour market reform pressures in good and bad times', LSE 'Europe in Question' discussion paper series (LEQS), paper no. 23

The same slide with key bullet points

- The EES was born with the European Commission's 1993 White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness & Employment
- It aimed to promote a social dimension complimentary to the EMU
- Goal: compromise between Keynesianism and monetarism
- It materialised in 1997 (TOA) because of a coalition of pro-social actors

Note the gap – there is space for more points

II. DURING THE PRESENTATION

Do not just read out the material of the slides! This is self-defeating for many reasons: first, unless you have a blind person in the audience, there is no point doing this. We can all read the text (if, of course, you have not packed it with a whole paragraph). Second, it will bore your audience to tears, as we all know what you will say – they are here to hear YOU not read your slides. Thirdly, it becomes tiring for you as well – you need to be a bit flexible while you present if needed.

Avoid sterile presentations: Nobody will question your integrity if you say something interesting, provocative or funny. Why not refer to current events and say how your paper is relevant? Again, a joke is the best way to make the audience feel comfortable.

Always keep eye contact with the audience: You may want to consult your notes, but you should have prepared in advance (as we said in part I of this document) and know very well what you will say. If you need to read out from a document, the audience will lose interest, and it only shows that you did not prepare properly or know your work well. Why do you have to constantly read your notes if you are an emerging expert in your field of research?

Avoid talking too fast/slowly/quietly/loudly: you want to create a comfortable atmosphere that will not tire people. So make yourself audible by talking clearly, steadily and comfortably. Everybody should be able to hear you without too much effort.

Always be on time with your presentation: Taking more than the allocated slot is poor manners and not respectful to the other panellists and the audience. Make sure that you are on time – perhaps



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aim to finish 1 minute earlier.

The last three points require practice either in front of the mirror or with a friend. Always use a timer or watch when doing this. Avoid delivering your presentation for the first time in your panel. You must have practised its delivery at least a couple of times in terms of timing, flow and structure.

III. AFTER THE PRESENTATION

The main work is done, but now it is time for you to make the audience even more interested in your paper. The best way to do this is by engaging with the questions of the audience.

Make sure you answer any questions asked to you clearly and directly: Avoid long stories and anecdotal evidence. If you feel that the audience spotted a weakness in your paper, say so and thank them for doing so. Getting feedback on your work is why you came to the conference, after all. There is no need to be defensive, as this only shows insecurity. If the question asked exposes a weakness or a problem, being defensive will only make the audience less interested in your paper.

“Do not be afraid to say ‘I don’t know’... This is an opportunity for you and the audience to learn”



Feel free to ask the opinion of the audience: The questions part can be interactive. If, for instance, somebody claims to know something more than you (e.g. somebody in the audience was/is a practitioner during the period you were investigating) you can ask them for their opinion when you finished answering questions (maybe after the panel, you can talk to them privately and get some vital information that the current literature is unaware of?).

Do not be afraid to say 'I don't know': Another error of presenters is to start rambling when somebody asks them something they do not know the answer to. We are human and not encyclopaedias. If someone from the audience raises a point that you don't know how to answer, feel free to say so and explain why you cannot answer. You may not have the evidence, not know the literature, etc. This is OK; remember: this is an opportunity for you and the audience to learn. It's not a quiz or game show.

In case you have no questions, jump into the conversation: It may happen that your paper does not raise any questions. This is a sign that something went wrong in the presentation. Maybe it was too technical, or left the audience indifferent, etc. You can take the opportunity to say something additional about your paper by asking the Panel Chair to comment on another question, debate or paper. You can use expressions such as: 'although my paper deals with X, what you said is very interesting / relevant because...'

Finally, it is advisable to keep some contact with your panellists or members of the audience. Networking will help your work and profile. Don't disappear into oblivion after the end of your panel!

We hope you find this information useful. Be aware that it will take time to significantly improve your presentation skills. Even famous and experienced professors practice their presentations on their own in front of the mirror and we all do blunders from time to time. But with patience and practice you can only become better and win even the most demanding audience.

Author Note:

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