

How to present your work at conferences

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A lesson as an example...

Motivating Question: How can you most effectively use 10-15 minutes to present your work?

- Importance: Talks are given disproportionate weight by professions
- These are extreme constraints:
 - Not enough time to really describe your work
 - Most of the audience will not have read it
 - Most conferences stink, most papers stink, most panels stink, and most discussants stink (but you can see your friends)
 - The audience is sparse, bored, and not there for you
- Your goal: Give an excellent talk
 - Communicate most important points about your work
 - Tease the larger project
 - Be an effective presenter

If you can only remember one thing today: The more you try to do, the less you will do well

- Rule #1: 7 slides, including the title.
 - You will ignore my advice. I'm factoring that in.
- Rule #2: Do not start with your paper and edit it down
 - Instead, identify the one thing you want the audience to remember, and build the rest of the talk around that point
 - Practical advice: Sketch out slides on paper. Storyboard it.
- Rule #3: Think like an audience member
 - “I wonder when the bar opens?” “Why am I here?”
 - Write a talk that makes people know the payoff is coming, tells them why they should care, and deliver it
 - Remember the warning about length? You have to have time to deliver

Which content? The important stuff (Duh!)

- What is important will be context specific
 - Your discipline and area of research will guide what is necessary
 - This is not the same as what is important when you submit a paper for review
- Example: American Politics, my own work
 - Question, link to literature, research design/data, results
 - Is partisan bias real? Survey data show polarization, conduct experiment where pay people for correct responses, find that it substantially reduces polarization, suggests polarization is affective rather than sincere
- Reminder: You can tease things you don't do in the talk

How can you become comfortable presenting?

- Slides
 - Good slides are like an outline. They provide structure for you, and they guide the listener
 - Warning: Too many slides, or slides disconnected from narrative of talk, do not serve this purpose
- How do I practice presenting?
 - At the extreme, start with every word written, practice, winnow to outline, retain outline as backup
 - Please don't read your talk if you can avoid it
 - Record yourself giving the talk. Repeat with friends/etc.
 - Practice dealing with time constraints
- But I'm afraid!
 - Answer: We evolved in a world of extreme threats, with wolves/etc.
 - Implication: We all are, it never goes away, and you just get used to it
 - The more simple your talk, the easier it is to give well
 - Remember to eat/drink, sleep, and breath

What about the discussant and audience?

- Discussants/Chairs:
 - Send them the paper with ample time, slides too.
 - Don't assume they will download from the conference website
 - Thank them, don't get into arguments
 - Ask for clarification about time to present. Follow the rules
- Audience:
 - Fast food rule of talking to toddlers: Repeat the question, then answer.
 - You get points for showing you understood
 - Offer to send them the paper if the answer is addressed in it
 - Be brief. This isn't a filibuster.
 - You can always duck by saying "I appreciate the feedback, I'd like to hear what other people have to say and then we can talk after the session."
 - Don't reflect hostility. Be gracious.
 - 1 out of every 20 comments is useful, rarely more

Concluding: Let people know you are done, and remind them what they have learned

- A talk is a difficult task, but one you can master
- Say less to communicate more
- Build your talk around the core things you want to share
- Practice and good design improve talks
- Be gracious in dealing with discussants and the audience
- This is slide #7 (including the title). Goodbye.