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A Guideline on Presenting with Clarity and Appeal in Academia

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PRELIMINARIES

Dear reader

Undeniably, presenting results of scientific research to smaller or larger groups of scientific peers is part of scientific routine, just as summarizing the current progress of project-related work to workgroups or other faculty members in meetings and retreats. Apart from written publications, this is one of the main channels of knowledge transfer and thereby contributes to the overall scientific output of any researcher.

In case of academic presentations, success does not only depend on the validity and novelty of the represented data and findings, but is also substantially influenced by the ability to present clearly and convincingly with careful tailoring to the target group. To hone presentation skills, it is necessary to consider the most relevant factors exerting an influence on these situations, eventually allowing a well-organized, appropriately delivered and self-confident talk.

This handout provides a brief overview of select main aspects that govern the successful preparation and implementation of a talk in academia. Several aspects deserve attention, both before giving a speech and during the performance itself. Before the speech, considerations include the target group, structure and organization of the content and getting into the right state of mind. During the presentation itself, noteworthy factors are the appropriate use of voice and body language as well as keeping in touch with the audience and involving it.

Several thoughts on being different or remarkable finalize this concise and clearly not exhaustive list of ideas. Beyond this, the recommended literature offers ample opportunities for more detailed follow-up studies.

1. PART: BEFORE THE PRESENTATION

1.1 PREPARATIONS: CONSIDERING TARGET GROUP AND CONTENT

First, a precise formulation of topic and aim of the presentation is needed for the fundamental orientation of preparations. Does the aim of the presentation – should it inform or convince - presumably match the expectations and needs of the audience? This is where the clear identification of the target group is indispensable. The following questions may serve as a guiding line:

- Who are the listeners - beginners, experts, listeners from other scientific disciplines, potential competitors – and how many are to be expected?
- What is their previous knowledge in the subject area and how much specialist knowledge can be delivered without background information or further explanations?
- What is the language level of the listeners, is it a multinational audience with varying levels of expertise in the employed language?

The answers to the above questions regulate the options of the speaker, especially discourse elements like technical terms and the employed vocabulary, but also the general orientation and strategy of the presentation.

Beyond this, the choice of media and methods, support by multimedia visuals or other presentation devices depends on the equipment which will be available at the venue, so information about these needs to be obtained in advance.

Then, content-oriented preparations can begin and have to include a careful choice of topical elements which can realistically be dealt with in the given time frame. Thus, the overall scope of the presentation needs to be defined and limited at the same time. The content needs to be arranged in a logical sequence and embedded in a previously known background so that the audience can relate to the new information and mental uptake processes are facilitated. The standard structure of introductory elements, a main body of information and the summarizing conclusion at the end should be maintained and prepared accordingly.

1.2 SIGNPOSTING AND STRUCTURE, THE IMPORTANCE OF START AND FINISH

The structure and setup of a talk is not only important for the speaker to work along that memorized skeleton, but also for the audience to maintain orientation and feel informed. As a consequence, the overall organization of the talk should briefly be communicated in advance and during the presentation itself. Being connected with transitional devices, the main body of the talk should be delivered at a steady and comfortable speed. All in all, it should clearly depict the development of conclusions and make it possible for the audience to follow the mental roadmap communicated before. Interim summaries may be helpful after longer explanations or to draw the attention to central take-home messages; in short talks, however, they could be omitted.

Signposting vocabulary and transitional phrases/chunks are freely available on the net in abundance and can also be found in the recommended sources listed at the end of this handout.

A proper structure includes a clear and crisp start as well as an announced and unmistakable end – these two elements deserve more consideration. The start is responsible for setting the initial level of attention and thereby defines the expectation of the audience; a failure to offer this convincing start makes it much harder for the speaker to regain lost ground and convince in the talk later on.

An optimum head start can be supported by

- evenly distributed eye contact with the audience members to establish contact,
- a consciously chosen, favorable posture accompanied by a positive and open facial expression,
- a short moment of inner recollection and
- carefully articulated first sentences at a controlled speed.

Nothing is harder to compensate than a start which appears lacking in concentration or effort. This first impression has a lasting effect and will influence the judgment of the audience, consciously or subconsciously. However, the opening must not only clearly state the topic of the talk, but also display its relevance for the listeners.

The unmistakable end is another important element, as it is responsible for the lingering last impression and may flaw an otherwise successful delivery. This end needs to be announced; it should not surprise listeners or include any new information. A brief summary of the main points should precede the carefully chosen and strong final words or closing line before questions and answers can be invited.

1.3 FIGHTING NERVOUSNESS: GETTING IN THE RIGHT STATE OF MIND

Reminding oneself of a few fundamental notions right before the start is a good way to combat needlessly high levels of tension.

FIRST OF ALL: the audience is generally interested in what a speaker has to tell them.

Obvious as this may sound, a tense speaker may fall into the trap of regarding the listeners as an opposing force pitted against her or him. Then, a stern reminder of the general and positive interest of the audience can help to straighten this misjudgment.

SECONDLY: the audience is on your side.

To visualize a benevolent audience is a very apt way to calm down and retain an open mental disposition needed for interactive sharing. Connecting to the first idea mentioned above, it appears very realistic to state that listeners who open-mindedly welcome the input with genuine interest are much more common than competitors who scrutinize a performance to find flaws in it.

THIRDLY: be enthusiastic about your content and data!

There is hardly a more impactful single factor than this, as no audience can be thrilled by the presentation of any research findings if the speaker does not display enthusiasm herself or himself. In moderation, a certain passion for the work needs to be demonstrated with the voice, the body language and a proper choice of words. In the end, this will not go unnoticed and increase the perceived credibility and sympathy among listeners.

As even acclaimed actors and experienced speakers have openly admitted the frequent

occurrence of stage fright before public appearances, it is not surprising that the fear of public speaking achieves top positions in several quantitative surveys.

However, it is possible to demystify certain troublesome aspects and reduce anxiety to a more realistic level. An increasingly confident implementation allows a much better focus on the main issue of the talk: the content!

Most importantly, the perceived stress should be re-channeled into the presentation as a source of energy, as increased levels of adrenalin make it easier to concentrate on a challenging task like a conference talk. Acknowledging the stress removes some of its dread, and it shows that a situation deserves to be taken seriously.

Nevertheless, the following ideas may help to calm down.

- i) Cristina Stuart (2005, see recommended reading) says: Familiarity breeds confidence. To be prepared as well as possible and know the presentation like the back of one's hand decreases the fear of losing track. Rehearsing counts.
- ii) Nervousness leads to quick and shallow breathing, so inhaling deeply and slowly is a simple but effective measure just before the start
- iii) An upright posture projects self-confidence and greatly facilitates control of the voice, whereas the lack of it leads to feelings of discomfort and affects the mental well-being, too.
- iv) A professionally rehearsed conduct on stage masks the full degree of anxiety one feels inside, a fact which may help to suppress detrimentally high levels of self-monitoring processes.

2. PART: DURING THE PRESENTATION

2.1 BODY LANGUAGE VOCAL AND VISUAL

The body language has a substantial but sometimes underestimated influence on the perception of a speech or talk. How a speaker moves, sounds, and looks tells the listener a lot about the speaker, whether she or he is credible, capable, authentic, self-confident, and well-prepared for the event- in the end: worth listening to Numerous factors of body language and non-verbal communication have an impact on both audience and speaker. Necessarily, the factors that exert a detrimental influence and lead to subconscious irritations of the audience should be avoided as far as possible. To achieve this, awareness of the following factors helps to steer toward a more successful and controlled implementation.

- EYE CONTACT

Different ideas prevail; different settings like venue or size of audience govern or limit the given options. Whether it is the broad sweeping gaze in a lecture hall or at a bigger conference, or individual eye contact when talking to a small group of decision makers: attention needs to be spread evenly to demonstrate interest and maintain contact. No area/part of the audience (in the first case) or no individual listener (in the second scenario) should feel neglected. One way to attain “anchor” points for the speaker in case of a large audience is to establish eye contact with select individuals in the front rows from time to time.

Note: Eye contact with individual listeners should be maintained for more than just a fleeting second, but must not develop into a stare – especially in case of a multinational audience. As is true

for the following factors as well, this is a question of awareness and practice: after a while, scanning the crowd with an appropriate speed will become a routine part of presenting.

- STANCE AND POSITION

An open and non-confrontational stance requires an upright posture, but without folding the arms or parking hands in the pockets. A position behind a lectern or a laptop may appear like a shield between listeners and speaker, so positioning oneself in direct view of the audience may be preferable where possible.

It goes without saying that a speaker between the projected slides and the audience obstructs the view, so positions on the side of visual aids are fine. If the stage size allows, a speaker can change the sides from time to time to offer the listeners an equally fair share of a comfortable view.

- MOVEMENT AND GESTURES

Both too much movement and the complete absence thereof can irritate the listeners. Therefore, shifting the weight from one foot to the other from time to time appears most natural and reduces tension of the speaker. Beyond this, it is advisable to control and manage the other extremities: use gestures in moderation and in moderate speed to emphasize important points of a talk, but avoid fast and erratic movement of arms or hands. Hands should consciously be kept from fiddling with each other, touching parts of the face repeatedly or follow repetitive routines like opening and closing flipchart markers.

- FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

The face is one of the most focal points of attention in this situation, so it needs to reflect interest in the subject and clearly show involvement. Thus, a tense and unmoving facial expression may provide interpretational conflicts in the listener – it should support and emphasize the talk, not be in contrast to it. Despite this matter-of-fact situation in scientific settings, the facial expression and the use of the voice are essential instruments to connect to the human part of the audience. Displaying a smile and a friendly face helps to build rapport, so this chance to generate a bit of social glue which helps to win the audience should not be missed.

- THE VOICE: SPEED, PAUSING, AVOIDING MONOTONY

Lastly, but of considerable importance: the voice is the central instrument to play for the performance, so these key factors are impactful:

i) Avoid monotony at all costs

The voice can be modulated, going up and down, emphasizing in moderation and only the highlights, filling them with life and energy – the aforementioned enthusiasm is largely transported with the voice! Monotony can flaw even brilliant results of a research project.

ii) Reduce speed to a pleasant and mostly steady flow of information

It is a sign of courtesy and empathy to use a moderate speed of delivery,

making it possible for listeners to digest and file even complex issues. A quick running down of items is not only an unnecessary cognitive stress factor, but also makes it much harder for listeners with a different language background.

iii) Place pauses to emphasize and segment parts of the talk

The human mind needs a short break from time to time to ‘store away’ the new information. Receiving and storing new information in a rush holds the risk of missing parts and the failure to understand cause-effect relationships of the elements of the talk.

Complex matters in a potentially foreign language are difficult enough to comprehend, so the cognitive resources of the audience members should not be tested unnecessarily.

Noteworthy, albeit secondary effect: a moderate pace makes a much more controlled impression of the speaker and allows her or him to keep better control of content and internal organization. The faster the delivery, the higher the risk of losing the train of thought, forgetting something entirely or making language mistakes.

Additionally, a **controlled** speed allows using the voice in a much more effective way!

2.2 INVOLVING THE AUDIENCE

A presentation is a reciprocal give-and-take situation, not a one-way communication or a singular, unidimensional streaming of information from the presenter to the listeners. While it is inevitable that the speaker claims the dominant part of the action, the audience needs to be involved and addressed to keep its attention level from dropping, inspire active thinking and captivate their minds.

As direct question and answer procedures are not always appropriate or possible, a connection to the audience can be achieved by making them feel included, simulating a *whiff* of dialogue. Statements like the following can help:

- please imagine that/consider the following ...
- you might agree with me when I describe this as ...
- you may recall that/let us look back at ...
- therefore, let us turn to ...
- we experienced this as a serious breakthrough in the field of ...
- I could imagine that you ask yourself the following question: ...

Especially the use of the first person plural puts both speaker and listeners in a similar position, regarding problems from a shared viewpoint and thus creating a feeling of commonality and collaboration. Using this inclusive we, as it is called, has a rhetorical function and acts group cohesive. It is a common and easy, but effective

way of mentally involving and activating the audience, thereby increasing their chances of remaining alert and attentive. All in all, speaker and audience feel closer to each other, they share an interest, explore issues together and evaluate their values and credibility as a group – it seems. On the one hand, this kind of limited and subconscious bonding makes it easier to convince audiences; on the other hand, they feel taken more seriously, involved and appreciated.

2.3 Q & A AND THE FEEDBACK

The organizational framework regulates whether a feedback or question-and-answer session is part of the proceedings. For this, a careful preparation of the core content allows answering any question to the best of one's knowledge. Rehearsal of potential questions helps to be prepared for the relevant issues, but there is always room for the unexpected.

If questions exceed the speaker's current state of knowledge, it is best practice to state so clearly, promise to obtain the missing details and get back to the audience member after the conference. It is imperative to keep this type of promise, though, as a failure to do so may damage the speaker's reputation. So contact these audience members after the contribution, ascertain contact data if necessary and deliver the missing information as soon as possible after the conference or event.

Very helpful ideas in regard to the rehearsal of questions and especially how to deal with difficult or manipulative questions can be found in Cristina Stuart's book in the section **How to handle questions effectively** and **How to deal with difficult questions**.

3. ON BEING DIFFERENT...

Being remarkable and distinct, thus being the one presenter that audience members talk about during the lunch break or even after the conference, is an ambitious aim. However, there are settings which require adaptation to third parties' expectations and conventions. Three levels of restrictions need to be considered:

- **Small/local scale:** expectations and demands raised by the local authority, e.g. a PhD supervisor, principal investigator, chairholder, head of a research group etc.,
- **Medium scale:** regulations stipulated within temporary settings, e.g. conferences, research retreats, or other gatherings of scientific peers,
- **Large scale:** general conventions regarding dos and don'ts in a scientific field, discipline or peer group.

Obviously, it is necessary to get acquainted with these expectations and conventions to adhere to the expected standards.

Despite the aforementioned need to adapt, blending in with the crowd may not be the most promising way to achieve identity and reputation in the long run. There are means of getting noticed and being remembered, but *they* need to be applied in moderation: e.g. a *bit* of humor without being unduly funny, a *bit* of personal enthusiasm without appearing unprofessional, a *bit* of rhetoric décor: these are elements that shape a more individual style.

As a junior researcher or presenter, it appears wise to avoid radical experiments and leave the more individual items to senior researchers and other higher-ranking contributors. Later on, experience helps to get a feeling for what is appropriate and where deviations from the routine may be considered.

4. RECOMMENDED READING

Giving Academic Presentations, second edition: Michigan series in English for academic & professional purposes; Susan M. Reinhart, University of Michigan Press, revised edition of 2013.

The Craft of Scientific Presentations, second edition: Critical steps to succeed and critical errors to avoid; Michael Alley, Springer Verlag, 2013.

Speaking about Science: A manual for creating clear presentations; Scott Morgan, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Dazzle 'em with Style: The art of oral scientific presentation; Robert R.H. Anholt, Academic PR Inc, 2005.

Slide:ology: The art and science of creating great presentations; Nancy Duarte, O'Reilly & Associates, 2008.

Speak for Yourself: How to give persuasive presentations and entertaining talks – with confidence; Cristina Stuart, Piatkus Books, 2005.