

Comp495: Tips for Good Presentations

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Here are 42 tips for making a good presentation. These are organized in terms of:

- the structure of your presentation: how you should organize the material in your talk;
- the visible content of your presentation: what should appear on your slides;
- using tools: key things to remember about the use of presentation software;
- your speaking: things to bear in mind about what you say and how you sound to the audience;
- your interaction with the audience: recognizing that there are other people in the room, and that it is with them that you are communicating; and
- your physical presence: the audience will be looking at you as well as at your slides, so make sure they see what you want them to see.

Below, there's a section devoted to each of these areas. The most important key points are highlighted in bold.

You are strongly encouraged to use the items listed here as a checklist before, during and after the construction of your presentation.

1 The Structure of Your Presentation

1. **Always have a separate title slide** with your talk's title and your name.
2. Except for very short presentations, **always have a slide that sketches the outline of your talk**. If you don't have enough time for such a slide, then make sure you provide a verbal outline at the beginning: always tell the audience what you are going to tell them, then tell them it, then tell them you've told them it.
3. **Make the aims of your talk clear at the outset**. Make sure your talk has a point, and that you communicate this to your audience: what is the one thing you'd like them to remember if they remember nothing else?
4. **Make sure you present a logical argument**; your points should follow naturally one to the next. Before you create your slides, think about the structure of your presentation and consider what steps you need to go through to reach your intended goal.
5. **Always have a concluding slide**. If you're presenting material that doesn't have an obvious conclusion, at least recap the main points you have made; but it's better if you can think about what a decent conclusion might be when you start planning the talk – ask yourself, what point do I want to get across here?
6. If the planned flow of your presentation requires returning to material on a previous slide, repeat the slide rather than actually going back in the presentation.

2 The Visible Content of Your Presentation

7. **Make sure you know what you are talking about!** Research your material well. Never just copy your slide content from another source without understanding it; it usually shows in the way you talk over the material.
8. Try to make your content interesting: think about the order in which you present things, and **make a story out of what you have to tell.**
9. **Use graphics and illustrations** to support what you have to say: a picture really can be worth a thousand words.
10. **Use statistics and numbers** to back up your argument. Where appropriate, present numbers in tables: a clear and well-constructed table can save you many words on a slide.
11. **Make your slides attractive.** That doesn't mean using garish colours, lots of different fonts, and superfluous sounds and images: the means of presentation should be transparent so that it doesn't distract from the content. Make sure your use of colour and fonts is consistent across all your slides.
12. **Don't clutter your slides with too much information:** if PowerPoint automatically shrinks your text to make it fit, you probably have too much on the slide.
13. **Always number your slides.**
14. **Think about the role of each of your slides in the presentation.** What is it doing there? How does it fit into the argument you are developing?
15. **Don't use colours which are hard to see:** for example, yellow text is usually invisible on a white or light background.
16. **Choose your slide titles with careful thought:** you have limited display space, so don't waste it. Each slide should have a different title, so that conveys part of the meaning that you want to communicate using that particular slide. For example, titles like *Features of the SDK (I)* and *Features of the SDK (II)* don't make any important distinctions: structure your content so that you can give each slide a meaningful title, so that you might have *SDK Features that Improve Productivity* and *SDK Features that Reduce Bug Counts*.
17. **Explain terms that might be unfamiliar to the audience.** Don't use unfamiliar abbreviations without expanding them.
18. **Use examples** to make definitions of concepts clear.
19. **Make sure your grammar and spelling are correct.**
20. Make sure you follow the appropriate grammatical conventions for bulleted lists of items.
21. Where appropriate, back up your claims by referring to the literature. In most cases you don't need complete bibliographic references: author/date pairs are often enough to communicate to a knowledgeable audience where they will find the evidence.

3 Using Tools

22. **Make sure you are familiar with all the basic machinery in the presentation tool you use:** it should go without saying that you should know how to start the slide presentation, but also make sure you know how to go backwards to previous slides and how to jump to particular slides; you will often need to do this in answering questions from the audience.
23. Explore all the functionalities that your presentation tool provides; for example, careful use of builds, animations and sounds can help you present your information in a controlled and effective manner. But **don't use effects just for the sake of it;** in particular, be aware that people usually get tired of sound effects very quickly, and some people find the 'progressive revelation' use of builds insulting.
24. Make sure you are aware of all the different ways of advancing slides in your presentation. In particular, holding the mouse in your hand as you stand means you can progress the presentation without returning to the laptop every time.

4 Your Speaking

25. **Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse:** and do real rehearsals, so that you know how you will explain complex elements of your talk; don't leave it to run-time to work out how you will describe something in words. At the same time, do not rehearse so much that you learn a script parrot-fashion; experiment with different ways of saying things each time you rehearse.
26. **Make sure that your talk will not run over the allotted time.**
27. **Don't just read off the slides:** take advantage of having two modalities (your voice and your slides) by having different but complementary and clearly related information in each. Your slides should provide a skeleton that you talk to and around.
28. At the same time, make sure that the audience can see the relationship between what you say and what is on the slide. If you skip a point on a slide in your verbal presentation, make sure that the audience know this is what you are doing so they don't get confused as to what you are talking about.
29. **Speak clearly and not too fast:** if you think you may have said something that wasn't clear, you can repeat the same point using other words to say the same thing; and force yourself to pause periodically.
30. **Avoid speaking in a monotone.** Tape record yourself to see what you sound like; listen to how others speak in presentations, and listen to how news broadcasters speak on the radio and television; experiment with using intonation to emphasise points and make what you say sound more interesting.
31. Make sure that you are speaking at an appropriate volume for the room. If the room is large and you are not sure if you can be heard, ask if people at the back can hear you properly.
32. **Take the time to recap at the end of each major segment of your talk,** so that audience knows where they are.

33. **Watch out for distracting verbal behaviours**, such as repeated uses of *uh, um, yes?, okay, right*, and so on. Again, tape recording yourself is an excellent way of identifying these kinds of things.

5 Your Interaction with the Audience

34. Don't start your talk by apologizing for feeling nervous.
35. **Always look at the audience**; try to make eye contact with as many different people as possible. Make sure you don't spend most of the talk looking at one person.
36. **Try to avoid using notes**, and if you need to look at the screen, either make sure you are standing at the side of it so you can point at things, or look at the laptop display: don't turn your back to the audience.
37. Try to develop a relaxed style. This is easier said than done, but you can often do things to relieve your nervousness: consciously pace yourself, take a breath after making significant points.
38. Consider engaging the audience by asking them a relevant question at the beginning of the presentation: for example, if you were going to talk about speech recognition systems, you might ask how many members of the audience had used such a system.
39. Only use humour if you are confident it will work: jokes that fall flat will knock you off your stride. Don't laugh at your own jokes or comments.

6 Your Physical Presence

40. **Watch out for physical behaviours that the audience may find distracting**: playing with coins in your pocket, playing with your pen, constantly referring to your notes, rubbing your hands, crossing your arms, slouching or adopting an unnatural posture, pacing around the room or moving around too much, having your hands on your hips, rocking backwards and forwards.
41. Use your hands to add expression to your talk.
42. Point to things on the screen to emphasise things and to make it clear what you are talking about, either by using your hand if you are at the side of the screen, or a laser pointer if you are further away. As a last resort you can use the mouse on the display, but this doesn't work as well.