

Giving a Conference Talk

Mike Dahlin
University of Texas at Austin

Below are points to consider and an outline for a conference talk. The outline is a starting point, not as a rigid template. Most good speakers average two minutes per slide (not counting title and outline slides), and thus use about a dozen slides for a twenty minute presentation.

Points to Consider

- Oral communication is different from written communication.

Listeners have one chance to hear your talk and can't "re-read" when they are confused. Often they have or will hear many talks on the same day. There are two well-know ways to communicate your point effectively. The first is to K.I.S.S. (keep it simple stupid). Second, repeat key insights: tell them what you're going to tell them (Forecast), tell them, and tell them what you told them (Summary).

- Think about your audience.

Most audiences should be addressed in layers: some are experts in your sub-area, some are experts in the general area, and others know little or nothing. Who is most important to you? Can you still leave others with something? For example, pitch the body to experts, but make the forecast and summary accessible to all.

.

- Think about your rhetorical goals.

I recommend two goals for conference talks: leave your audience with a clear picture of the gist of your contribution, and make them want to read your paper. Your presentation should not replace your paper, but rather whet the audience appetite for it. Thus, it is commonly useful to allude to information in it. Thus, it is commonly useful to allude to information in the paper that can't be covered adequately in the presentation. (The goals for an interview talk, for example, are radically different.)

- Practice in public. Prepare.

It is hard distilling work down to 20 minutes.

See David Patterson's "How to Give a Bad Talk"

A Generic Outline

- Title/author/affiliation (1 slide)
- Forecast (1 slide)

Give gist of problem attacked and insight found (What is the one idea you want people to leave with? This is the "abstract" of an oral presentation.)

- Outline (1 slide)

Give talk structure. Some speakers prefer to put this at the bottom of their title slide. (Audiences

like predictability.)

- Background

.Motivation and Problem Statement (1-2 slides)

.(Why should anyone care? Most researchers overestimate how much the audience knows about the problem they are attacking.)

- Related Work (0-1 slides)

Cover superficially or omit; refer people to your paper.

- Methods (1 slide)

Cover quickly in short talks; refer people to your paper.

- Results (4-6 slides)

Present key results and key insights. This is main body of the talk. Its internal structure varies greatly as a function of the researcher's contribution. (Do not superficially cover all results; cover key result well. Do not just present numbers; interpret them to give insights. Do not put up large tables of numbers.)

- Summary (1 slide)

- Future Work (0-1 slides)

Optionally give problems this research opens up.

- Backup Slides (0-3 slides)

Optionally have a few slides ready (not counted in your talk total) to answer expected questions.

(Likely question areas: ideas glossed over, shortcomings of methods or results, and future work.)

P.S. for Class Project Talks

The audience and rhetorical goals of a talk on a class research project are somewhat different than a conference talk. The audience includes the professor who will be evaluating your work. A rhetorical goal you should consider is convincing him/her that your work is solid, perhaps by placing less emphasis on technical background and more on methods.

Some of the talks for class may be of the “work in progress” flavor. Key things to emphasize in a WIP are motivation (what problem are you going to solve and why should the audience care that you are working on it?), approach (why should we expect you to succeed?), initial results (is the approach promising?) and future work (what exactly do you plan to do?)

Public speaking tricks

There are a number of “tricks” that take very little effort on your part but that can greatly increase your effectiveness. Make them habits and you will stand out from 90% of the technical speakers in the world.

- Point at the screen, not at the projector.
- Move your feet -- deliver the talk from different positions on the stage (but don't overdo it.)
- Repeat audience questions before answering them.
- Think about an audience question before answering it.
- If you don't know, say “I don't know.”
- Related work is generally abbreviated in a short talk. But if someone you expect to be in the audience has done related work, credit them in your talk.
- Make eye contact with audience members in different parts of the room.

- Fonts smaller than 18 point (20pt if using an LCD projector) are “fobidden”
- Lines that take more than one line are “forbidden”
- Debug your slides before you inflict them on an audience -- are the colors legible when projected? Spelling checked?
- Spend the 30 minutes before your talk in a quiet place thinking about the talk.
- Spend the 5 minutes before your talk concentrating on how you will deliver the first two or three slides

Acknowledgements

This information evolved directly from a similar discussion by Mark Hill, which was based on input from Jim Larus, Dave Patterson, and Jim Goodman.