

Notes on Conference Presentations
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I. As in any performance, the vast majority of the work comes prior to the actual presentation.

- (1) Prepare your presentation and handout (or Powerpoint slides¹) with great care. Have a clear point to make and be certain that everything in the presentation helps you make that point.
- (2) Include all relevant data and all relevant references.
- (3) Do a practice run or two on your own with a stop watch and a tape recorder.
- (4) Make sure any text you are speaking from **precisely** matches the handout with respect to section numbering and headings and example numbers.
- (5) Anticipate any likely questions or objections. Incorporate answers to really obvious ones in the presentation. Be ready for the others in the question period.

II. The handout.

- (6) Have **everything** relevant on it. Don't expect to use the blackboard for something you need, either example, or tree, or derivation. And don't expect the audience to understand something they can't see.
- (7) Number everything. It's fine, even desirable, to have some prose summaries scattered throughout the handout. But consider numbering them too, otherwise there will be no efficient way to direct the audience's attention to them.
- (8) If you like, divide the handout into titled and numbered sections. But **don't** under any circumstances restart the example numbering in each section. Few things are as confusing as having seven examples all numbered (3).
- (9) This one is just a personal quirk of mine, but I find it confusing and distracting when examples, tables, figures, charts, all have their own separate numbering systems. It makes it impossible to rapidly find anything, and it is crucial that your audience be able to find everything rapidly.
- (10) Include a list of references. It doesn't have to be in official journal format, but provide enough information that anything you refer to can be tracked down.
- (11) Include your university, address, and e-mail address.

III. The presentation.

- (12) Be confident (not apologetic), forceful (not withdrawn). Your ideas are as good as anyone's (and better than many).
- (13) Take exactly the allotted time, neither less nor more. (At many conferences, more isn't even a possibility. You will be cut off in mid sentence if you run over.)
- (14) Use your voice well. Project; speak to those in the back of the room. If you are reading your text - something I don't recommend unless you find it necessary - avoid the trap of speaking to your papers. You must speak to the audience. Modulate your voice. Provide

¹I always use handouts, so some of my comments might need to be adjusted.

- plenty of acoustic cues as to what is most important.
- (15) Don't talk too slow or (more likely) too fast. (You will have checked this earlier with your tape recorder.)
 - (16) Start strong. Make it clear just what your point will be and why it is important.
 - (17) Refer to every example by number. (Have you heard a presentation where this rule wasn't followed? It was very confusing, wasn't it?)
 - (18) Read your examples, if they are in a language you speak. Read the gloss too if the language isn't English. This might sound to you like a waste of precious time, but it isn't. If you just zoom through the talk simply mentioning example or paradigm numbers, nobody will be able to follow you. The audience needs time to digest the data, the patterns, the generalizations, and you give them this time by reading the examples. (One exception: if you have several examples that all illustrate the same point, just read the first and say that the others are parallel.)
 - (19) As you proceed, make the logic of the argument crystal-clear. Be fully explicit about what you are assuming and why, and how the conclusions follow from the premises. (And somehow without 'blowing your own horn' excessively, make sure to indicate what is new in your presentation.)
 - (20) End strong, with a good statement of what you have accomplished. Conclude with an applause line, and don't spoil it by 'stepping on it'.

IV. Handling questions.

- (21) Do not adopt a hostile attitude. Treat all questions and comments as if they are helpful. (Some of them actually are! Most people aren't out to get you.)
- (22) Repeat or restate every question before you begin to answer it. This accomplishes at least three things. First, chances are that most of the audience didn't hear the question. Second, it might have been stated unclearly. You can clarify it. Finally, restating it gives you a chance to figure out how you want to answer it.
- (23) Once in a while you will get a really moronic question. Don't denigrate it, don't ignore it. As you restate it, try to turn it into something relevant.
- (24) When you get a comment or suggestion rather than a question, elaborate on it a bit, and thank the commenter.
- (25) Sometimes you will get a good, clear, relevant, and devastating question. What do you do? As you restate the question, show exactly what is hard about it. Then, maybe, show how it is even HARDER than it initially appeared. Then speculate about a direction, admitting, if necessary, that the direction doesn't look too initially promising. Or else, possibly argue that the phenomenon is actually problematic for everyone.
- (26) Hang around during the break following your presentation. Audience members might want to discuss your ideas further. If you see people who offered questions or suggestions, thank them and engage them in discussion.