

SUCCESSFUL ORAL PRESENTATION: A CHALLENGE FOR EVERYONE

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Abstract: Beside publishing scientific or medical papers in national or international journals, oral presentations are essential for gaining national and international recognition. Thus, how we present the results and conclusions of our scientific work is as least as important as the results themselves. Regardless of our scientific field, we all have to communicate our knowledge and our findings to others, oral presentations being part of our everyday life. What we have to say is definitely of the utmost importance, but how we say it is at least as important. The present paper is an attempt to point out several aspects that should be taken into consideration when preparing an oral presentation, both communication and visual support-linked aspects.

Keywords: communication, image, visual support, selling process.

Oral presentations are part of the everyday life of teaching staff, researchers or scientists. We often attend high level conferences, but encounter difficulties in remaining focused until the presentation is over, or even before it reaches half of its duration. Sometimes, however, our attention is captured and we hardly realize half an hour has passed and wish the speaker went on even further, even though the subject is not particularly interesting. What we have to say is definitely of the utmost importance, but how we say it is at least as important.

Oral presentations are, in fact, communication.

By definition, communication consists in message transmission, active listening and message understanding verification. Humans communicate using 5 senses, i.e. sight, hearing, olfaction, feel of taste and touch, to which 5 messages are associated: sound, image, smell, taste, contact.

Oral communication means transmitting a message. Statistics say this is achieved 25% through words and 75% through sound.

Sound encompasses volume, articulation, rate, tonality and pauses. These are important to remember when speaking in front of an audience. We need to keep an adequate speech volume, not too high neither too low, and to speak clearly, articulated, slowly and with pauses. As far as volume is concerned, it depends on the acoustics of the room and the number of people present. Unamplified voice is suited for a room with up to 50 places, but for 150 or more a microphone is needed. Using a microphone requires attention. Usually, the speaker uses a podium stand and the microphone is fixed. The images to be presented are behind the speaker. During the presentation, when a particular chart or image needs introduction, the speaker will turn towards it and farther from the microphone, with the effect of lowering the sound volume. Because of this, we recommend that the speaker checks all the details regarding room acoustics, positioning and projection before the presentation. If the microphone cannot be detached from its stand, the speaker could adopt a position at 45 degrees relative to the audience and the projected material. If the microphone is mobile, care

must be exerted by holding it at an appropriate distance in order to obtain a comfortable sound level. When a lapel microphone is used, the speaker should choose clothes suitable for attaching such devices, and its placement should not exceed the level of the heart as the lowest limit. At the same time, the microphone should not touch any fabric so as to avoid unwanted parasitic noises.

Words chosen for the presentation must be clear and properly articulated to ensure that the audience understands them correctly.

One of the most frequent errors in oral presentations is the use of a too high rate of speech. Speech rate must be normal, not too slow lest the audience falls asleep, but slow enough to ensure comprehension, especially when the subject is completely new for the listeners. Our neural connections allow us to think at a rate of 400 words per minute, to express 250 words per minute and to integrate 140 words per minute, thus rate of speech becomes extremely important. We recommend the use of a speech rate of around 140 words per minute, or even less.

Tonality is harder to control, since we all natively have a particular speaking voice. However, if you have a higher-pitched voice, it is advised that you exercise “moving your voice to the stomach”. In brief, speech tonality must be pleasant, so as the audience does not have the impression they are yelled at.

Pauses during a presentation are paramount. They give the audience time to comprehend what is being presented to them. We recommend that the length of the pauses is at least equal to the time required to say “full stop comma”. Pauses can also be used when the audience has lost interest. In these cases, a longer pause will determine the audience to refocus on the speaker in order to find out what caused it.

Communication – 60% image, 30% sound, 10% words

Beside verbal communication, oral presentations also include nonverbal communication. The sense of sight gathers most of the useful messages, followed by smell, taste and touch. The audience sees the speaker and the visual support of the presentation, therefore the speaker’s postural attitude is very important. We recommend that the speaker looks at the audience as often and possible and smiles. It is important to keep a serene facial expression. The most suited method of looking at an audience is to follow an “M” or “W” pattern with the line of sight. This way, each participant at the conference will feel that they are given proper attention. Posture should transmit self-confidence and comfort. However, we do not recommend holding one hand in the pocket or crossing arms over the chest, an attitude that denotes aggressiveness; walking through the room when speaking is also to be avoided. The ideal posture should be straight, with equal support on both feet (inspiring confidence and stability), and hands should have the palms facing up, as a sign of openness towards the audience.

Oral presentation – a “selling process”

Oral presentation can be likened to a sales pitch. In essence, we sell ideas, knowledge, results, and last, but not least, our own person, our image. We must not forget that people buy benefits, not characteristics. Therefore, the presentation must be thought out and structured in

such a manner that it determines “buying”/acceptance. When applied to the medical field, we suggest that during the presentation you underline the benefits that the study/method/technique presented brings to the patient’s quality of life/ease of diagnosis/treatment improvement and so on. You can obtain this from the very beginning of your presentation by enunciating the major benefit of the theme you present in a short and simple sentence.

Specialists say that an adult person can maintain active attention for 20 minutes during a presentation, but more often attention is lost sooner when the presentation is not successful. At the beginning, the audience pays attention to the speaker, perhaps more to the person than to what he or she is saying. Attention usually decreases to 10-20% during the presentation and increases again towards the end. Figure 1 displays the attention chart in most cases. It is not the most desirable result – the ideal situation would be the one presented in Figure 2.

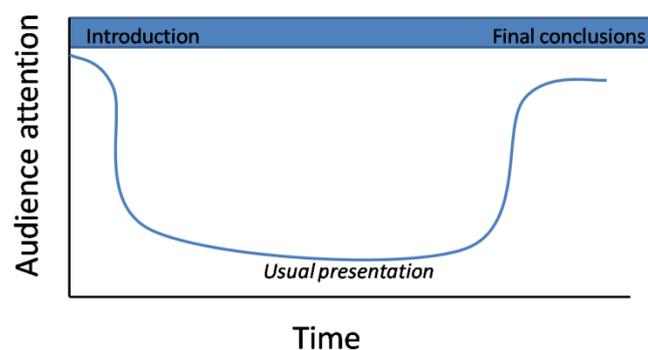


Figure 1. Audience attention during usual presentations

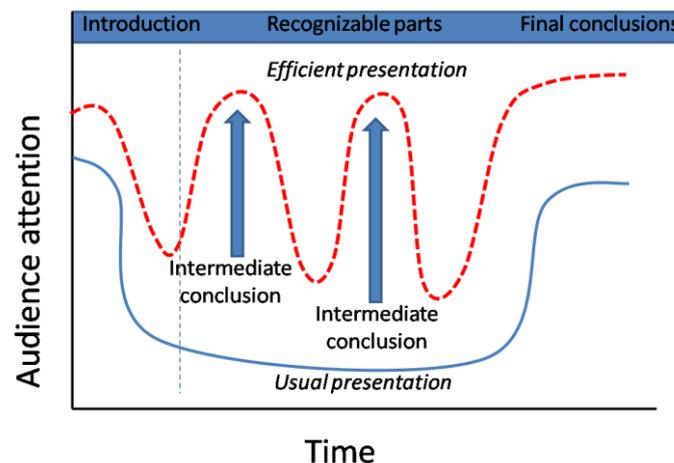


Figure 2. Ideal audience attention curve during successful presentations

You can use some tricks in order to catch the audience attention:

- as almost all the people in the audience listen at the beginning, we encourage you to add a bit of „drama” to your introduction; it is also the right moment to tell the audience that you will present a topic that they do not afford to miss;
- or you can start with an interesting story regarding your main subject;
- also you can state your message in the beginning, loud and clear;

- another technique might be to start with the conclusions, that will totally surprise the audience, and you'll become interesting to them; afterwards you will explain how you reached your conclusions;
- also you can divide your presentation in parts and conclude after each other, that will give you the attention chart appearing in Figure 2.

Most people encounter difficulties at the beginning of the presentation. The emotions are intense at that point, and the first words are perhaps the hardest. A usual introduction begins with “Hello, my name is [...], please allow me to present you [...]”. We do not encourage this modality of introduction, especially during a conference where the chairperson has already introduced you and your presentation. We recommend that you start with a formula similar to “Mr. /Mrs. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen”, followed by a short pause that will capture the audience’s attention, and the introductory part of your presentation. The general tendency is to quickly dispense with the introductory part, which constitutes a major error. We recommend that the introduction extends to approximately 30% of the presentation, because the audience is usually not familiar with the theme of your research, and even if they are, they are not displeased by a review of the general data, as long as it is made using a simple and clear language. Conclusions may also be mentioned at the end of the introduction.

Written papers are structured into introduction, aim, material and method, results, discussion and conclusions. Although the majority of speakers use the same succession in oral presentations, we find this approach to be wrong on multiple grounds (Figure 3). Whereas in a written paper the reader can return to previous sections in order to review data or better understand the conclusions, during an oral presentation the audience has to memorize the material and method and the results to understand the discussions and conclusions, which renders the presentation hard to follow and comprehend. We recommend another structure to be used in oral presentations (Figure 4).

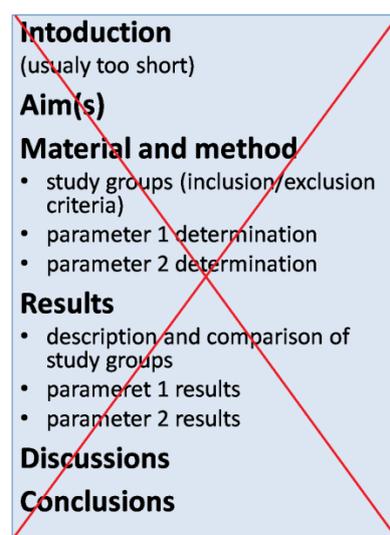


Figure 3. Wrong presentation structure

<p>Intoduction (we suggest 30% of the presentation; it is appreciated by most of the audience if it is presented as simple as possible)</p> <p>Aim(s)</p> <p>Study groups (inclusion/exclusion criteria)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • description and comparison of study groups <p>Parameters determination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parameter 1 description • Parameter 1 results and interpretation • Parameter 1 discussions and conclusions • Parameter 2 description • Parameter 2 results and interpretation • Parameter 2 discussions and conclusions <p>Conclusions</p>
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Figure 4 insertion . Recommended presentation structure

The presentation should preferably be divided into fragments, after which intermediary conclusions can be drawn. The attention of the audience is thus more efficiently drawn, because the presentation is easier to understand and audience members who lost interest can catch up with you at any time.

Conclusions must be clearly stated and enunciated at a slower pace. Don't forget that our mind integrates 140 words per minute, but conclusions can be spoken even slower.

We do not encourage ending the presentation with a slide containing a large "Thank you", even if it is on a nice picture or clip art background; rather, you can display a sentence/phrase synthesizing the main conclusion of the study. The last spoken phrase can be, for instance, "now that I have convinced you of the effectiveness of the study/method/etc., I will end by thanking you for your attention".

Furthermore, we do not recommend that the speaker asks the audience whether they have any questions, especially during a conference in which this is the duty of the chairperson.

Visual aid preparation

Images are very important; hence, visual aids have to be prepared very carefully. There is a general trend to overcrowd slides with animations and too much information. Speakers are afraid of forgetting details during their presentation and try to prevent that from happening by writing as much as they can on the slides. Wrong. Slides should be as simple as possible; they should bear a title and contain 5 or 6 lines at most. Letters should not be smaller than 32 points lest they become illegible. Fonts should be simple, such as Calibri, Cambria or Arial, and heavily serifed fonts should be avoided. Keep in mind that upper case letters are harder to read and follow than lower case ones, so writing a slide using the so-called "all caps" method is not desirable (Figure 5).

<p style="text-align: center;">This color is good</p> <p style="text-align: center; color: yellow;">This color is not recommended on white or light backgrounds</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CAPITAL LETTERS ARE MORE DIFFICULT TO READ than lower case letters</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sans serif fonts are easier to read than serified fonts</p> <p style="text-align: center;">32pts or bigger is recommended</p> <p style="text-align: center;">28pts, 24 pts, 20 pts, 18 pts or 16pts cannot be read by the audience</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Slide preparation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five words in line perfect • More than five words in line too crowded • Five lines on slide perfect • More than five lines on a slide too crowded • Always put title on slide
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Figure 5. Notice how crowded it looks, as it has 9 lines, although it has no title (left slide). We recommend 5 lines with no more than 5 words each (right slide).

The rule of 5 (the first 5 steps, 5 seconds, 5 words) is important when establishing contact with a new person, and as such we recommend that you use it when preparing your presentation: 5 lines per slide, 5 words per line. Colors are also very important. The most legible writing is the classic black or white, but combinations of yellow letters on a dark blue background or white letters on black can also be used. Textured backgrounds or overly complicated designs should be avoided, since they appear attractive at the beginning, but quickly grow tiresome and difficult to follow for the audience (Figure 6).

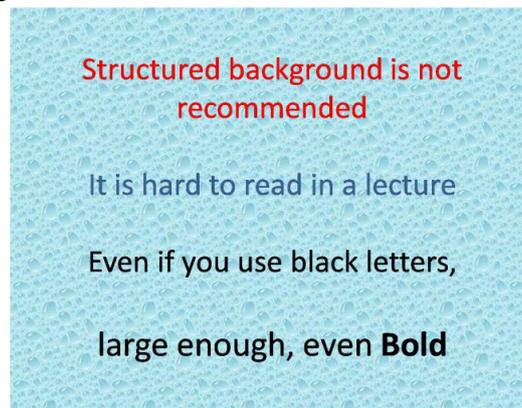


Figure 6. Textured background not recommended

Figures should be well thought out. Charts need to have a title and the values should not be represented as points (scatter plot chart)(Figure 7A), but rather as columns or lines (box plot, column or line charts)(Figure 7B). Chart axes should be labeled and each line or column should have a title appearing directly into the chart, not in the legend (Figure 7C).

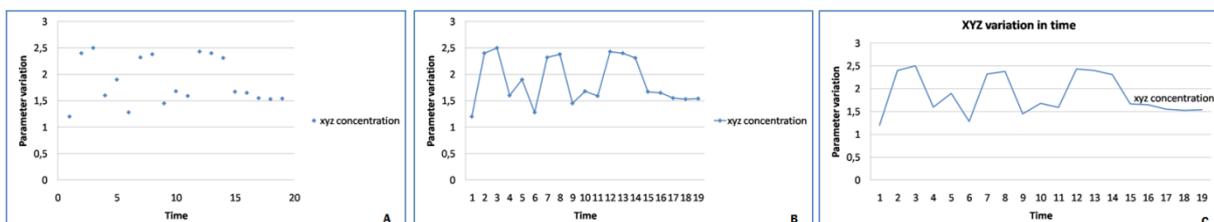


Figure 7 insertion . A) Poor graphic; B) Better graphic; C) Best graphic

It is not recommended to include tables in the presentation, but if it is unavoidable, the number of decimal places should be the same for all numerical values presented within a particular column.

We recommend inserting one chart in each slide, and allotting one minute for presenting each slide.

Prepare for final act

After the visual aid is designed, we recommend rehearsing the presentation with the countdown option activated; thus, you will perceive the correct timing and whether you have too much information on the slides. It is the best modality of checking these aspects. Failure to observe the allotted timeframe denotes lack of respect for the audience and for the following speaker; in order to avoid this, you have to shorten your presentation. We hope that you will not cut out parts from the introduction, but rather you will dispose of perhaps unessential information in the middle part of the presentation. Never compromise when it comes to introduction or conclusions. Rehearsals also help realizing whether the language used is too sophisticated. Use simple, short sentences, since they are the easiest to follow. You could write down the first few sentences on a sheet of paper, if you feel they are too difficult.

The conference room should be checked before the presentations begin, in order to assess the position of the speaker, the presence of a microphone, the acoustics and whether presentations are visible down to the last row in the room.

Use a clear language, appropriate for students. It will be more appreciated than an overly scientific one.

Speak loudly, clearly and with pauses. Mind your posture, do not cross your arms and do not place your hands in your pockets. Attire does not have to be formal, but jeans should be avoided. Smart casual or smart business attire should suffice.

Oral presentations mean communication, and communication means transmitting a message in such a way that it is understood by the audience. Knowing how the audience listens, understands and memorizes is the key to a successful presentation.

Aknowlegment : This paper was published under the frame of European Social Found, Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2007-2013, project no. POSDRU/159/1.5/S/136893

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