



Notes on Giving Class Presentations

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Content

- **Overheads:** If you're going to use overheads, try not to include long sections of text on them, which you then just read. Rather, make yourself a presentation outline (different from your original outline of what you'll include in your presentation!), and then just put salient points and concepts on the overheads. You can then use the overheads as collections of 'trigger words', to remind you what you want to say next, without having to read everything directly from the overheads. This will also make it much easier for students to take notes, and to extract the salient concepts from your talk. Also, as a general rule, a picture really *is* worth (at least) a thousand words, so try to include as many relevant figures as you can! (Cartoons can also be good, as ice-breakers; I don't think that there are *any* topics in cognitive science for which there are not at least 3 extremely-relevant 'Far Side' cartoons.)
- **Planning for the right amount of material:** One of the most challenging parts of giving a presentation, especially in a discussion-oriented seminar, is to know how much material to cover. On the one hand, you can include too little, and end up with time left but nothing to say. On the other hand, you can get so caught up in discussion that you never get to some of the most important parts of your talk! Part of this problem can be attenuated by practicing your presentation ahead of time, to get a good idea of how long things will take without any discussion at all. But you'll still have to deal with some uncertainty, depending on how much discussion your talk engenders. One thing you should try to do, therefore, is to have some extra material up your sleeve, which you don't plan to cover, but which you can pull out at the end if you have some unexpected time left over. Also, when making your outline, try to keep in mind the relative priorities of each section, and think about which parts you could shorten or jettison if pressed for time! (In general, of course, you want to encourage as much discussion as possible! Better to include less material but to cover it thoroughly and with lots of discussion than to include more material but have to race through it.)
- **The roadmap:** Try to begin your presentation — and, indeed, any other talk that you give! — with an explicit 'roadmap': a brief walk-through (perhaps with an accompanying overhead) of what you're going to cover in your talk! This is really just a reflection of the old writing advice to 'Tell your audience what you're going to say before you say it', but it's even more important in a talk than in a paper (since your audience can't shuffle back to the beginning if they get confused). Starting out with a roadmap will really help people to follow your talk, to understand the progression of different points, etc.

Style

- Speed: Many people, especially those who get nervous, end up talking too fast during presentations. Try to be aware of this, and talk at a comfortable pace. (When I first started giving presentations, I used to begin every outline w/ the words 'Talk slow!' in 36-point type!)
- Eye contact: Remember to look at the class during your presentation, and to make lots of eye contact. This serves to keep people alert and involved. If you're using overheads, interleave the transparencies with the paper copies, and then read off the paper copies in front of you while the class reads off of the screen. (In other words, don't turn your back on the class to read off of the screen yourself!)
- Organizing overheads: If you're using overheads, try to leave each one on the projector until you're ready for the next one. This is a minor point, but it can be very distracting to have a bright blank screen behind you.
- Be excited! Both excitement and boredom are contagious during class presentations, and you'll help keep people interested and involved if you're outwardly excited about what you're talking about!

Miscellaneous

- Preparation: Practice: It should go without saying that the single most important aspect to preparing your presentation is to practice delivering it! This is especially useful if you're nervous about public speaking, but there are also less obvious benefits: often it is only when you've actually run through a talk that you see how you should have organized it — by which point it is too late. If you have never done so, also consider videotaping yourself giving a practice presentation, and then watch the result. Just as many people think that their voice sounds 'weird' on a telephone recording, so many people think that videos of themselves speaking look weird — where did all those nervous tics come from?
- Preparation: Equipment: If you need any special equipment for your presentation — an overhead projector, slide projector, video projector, VCR, computer cables, laser pointer, chalk, etc. — be certain to make sure it's going to be there, and then arrive early to verify its presence. Though in many situations you can foist this responsibility on someone else, this freedom will be cold comfort when you can't show your visual aids.
- Presenting as a pair or group: If you present as part of a pair or a group, be sure to carefully budget your time and respective contributions. All members of the pair/group will be held equally responsible for any glaring asymmetries of this type. (In other words, if one member of the group takes up the overwhelming majority of the time, and the other member(s) can't get a word in edgewise, this will reflect negatively on everybody's grades, *especially* the person who took up most of the time!)
- Questions from the audience: Most of the time, you'll find that questions from the rest of the class start out slowly, but then pick up as the presentation continues. Indeed, you'll often find that it takes just a single question from someone to break the ice, after which the discussion will be much more interactive. Since you want to encourage discussion, you might therefore include some planned questions for the class early in your presentation, to jumpstart the discussion. And if a class seems particularly unresponsive, don't be shy about asking a few questions 'socratically'!

Miscellaneous (continued . . .)

- **Fonts for overheads:** When making your overheads, try not to dip very much below 24-point standard fonts (e.g. Palatino). With smaller type-sizes than this, students at the back of the class will inevitably have trouble making the words out. Of course, this means that you must fit less overall material on the overheads, but this is good anyway, since it forces you to edit, and to include only the most salient concepts. . .

Evaluation

- Giving class presentations, at this stage of your career, is meant to be a learning experience. Public speaking can be very scary for many people, but it is good to have some practice at it in a friendly environment, since you'll inevitably have to do it later on in more important contexts (especially if you end up teaching yourself, or giving papers at conferences). Rest assured that your confidence and/or anxiety during your presentation will have little to no bearing on your grade. Much more important is the degree of preparation and organization which you put into your presentation.
- Another reason for doing a class presentation is that it forces you to really understand the material, in a much more comprehensive way than when you're merely reading it. (This, by the way, never stops happening. I have never taught a class where I didn't learn something important about material I thought I already knew, as soon as I had to prepare to explain it to a class.) You're not expected to be an expert on your presentation topic, however, so you needn't feel shy about answering a difficult question with 'I don't know'. What is more important is to have become familiar with the basic material — especially any of the readings which the entire class has read — and to be able to answer questions about this material accurately.

Any comments on these notes? Anything you think it would be useful to add? If so, please let me know!