Good talks, Neurobiopsychology

You want to give good talks? You want to listen to good talks? Then here are some guidelines that might help.

1. Have something to say, say it, stop saying it (tnx to Saskia for this nice phrase).

- This is serious. Think about what you want to achieve. Try to phrase your objective in a 30s statement and let this guide you in the design of your talk. Make your summary slide first. Everything in the talk should lead up to that summary. In case you can stop your talk any time, bad sign, you are just rambling on without a clear objective.

2. Structure your talk.

- You should have your summary slide already (see #1 above). It answers some question. You start your talk by introducing the context and motivating why the question you address is an important question and should interest your audience. This gives you a nice bracket and a place for the contents of your work, leading smoothly from the question to the answer. Yes, it is CCC structure, what else?

  From the guidelines to your thesis: (Find out the mysteries of Context-Contents-Conclusion (CCC). At the beginning of each paragraph you write what the paragraph is about. This is the context. It gives the scope and may be formulated as a question and should not contain results or statements as such. At the end you write the conclusion. This is the literal bottom-line. It gives an answer within the scope of the context. Read the sequence of conclusions, it gives the summary. Read the context and conclusion of a paragraph, it must make sense, otherwise you have changed topic in between. In between is the content. Its only purpose is to lead up and support the conclusion. Once the conclusion is accepted, the content as such is forgotten. Read the sequence of contexts (first sentences), it gives you the outline of your theses.)

3. Each slide has a purpose

- For each and every slide think about why you show it and what is your message. Then write it down on the slide!
- When you think it is complex and cannot be put into one sentence or statement, well, then the scope of your slide is ill posed. Restructure the distribution of material across your slides.
- When you view your slide it might be clear to you. But your audience cannot read your mind and more often than not will not even listen to what you say (sad but true). Therefore it is of utmost importance to put the take home message of a slide onto the slide. This has to be done for each and every slide.

4. Have clear and beautiful slides

- Each slide is structured according to CCC. On top you state what this slide is about, it gives the context of the slide. This might be done in the form of pure CCC style or like a running head (e.g. intro, methods, results, discussion) or a combination. But this helps your audience to follow

through the talk. Then the content and at the bottom (or somewhere else if you like to be fancy) the conclusion of the slide. If you followed #3, this is easy.

- Avoid all text slides. Humans are not multitasking and can either read your slide or listen to what you say. Hence, when you say something different than can be read on your slide it is confusing. When you read the slide to your audience it is boring.
- Use supportive visual material. For everything you explain you should have something to point at. If you start waving your arms during some explanation something is missing on your slide.
- Tailor the visual material according to the needs. Typical figures or screenshot from analysis software is NOT suitable for presentations. They have to many tick marks, too small print, too thin lines, too small legend. They clutter the important aspects by too many details. For example, when 0, 100 and 200 are given on the abscissa, is it important to now where exactly 20, 40, 60, 80, 120, 140, 160, 180ms are? Not everybody has 20/20 visual acuity. Design the slide for realistic conditions. Step back 4m from your computer monitor and look at your slide. This might match the situation of rear seats in your audience. I need 1h or more for the design of a new slide.
- Clean up your slide and kick out all irrelevant stuff. If there is something on the slide visible that you never point at during your explanation, it is not needed. Avoid that your audience goes on some exploration into the intricate aspects of your data. They will not listen to what you are saying and come up with very strange ideas. Kick out everything that is not essential.
- After weeks of data analysis you might think that looking for the 1000th time at a certain kind of plot everything is perfectly obvious. This is a severe misconception. It is only obvious for you, as you have thought about it a lot. The audience cannot read your mind (still), but only look at the slide. And if it is a jumble of coloured lines they can only guess. This means that a collage of screen shots without written explanation and pointing out the important parts do not make a good slide.

5. Be prepared

- Have your presentation ready in time to do a sanity check.
- When you are listening to other talks at a conference and can adapt your slides to refer to these, extremely cool. You help your audience to relate to other talks and foster a common topic, which makes the organizers very happy.
- Do know your software and operating system. Inform yourself which keys/buttons to press to use a projector (really avoid having to ask the audience which Fx button to press to send the video signal onto the VGA port.)

- Test the equipment. When the fifth speaker fumbles with his laptop and needs a minute or two to start his presentation you will lose the attention of your audience.
- If case you have non-standard needs, specifically presenting on other hardware (e.g. USB stick on a general computer), using videos, using audio, test, test, test. This avoids a bad surprise due to incompatibilities of video codecs, malfunctioning audio, echoes, … .

6. Be on the ball during the presentation

- You have a clear objective (see #1), a well-structured talk (#2), purposeful slides (#3), beautiful slides (#4) and are prepared (#5), now go for it. This is your time.
- Talk to your audience, not to your slides. Do not turn your back towards the audience.
- If you lose track in between, do not worry. Just repeat the context and the conclusion. Nobody ever has complained when I repeated a conclusion yet one more time.
- Look at your audience and try to gauge whether it is still following you. Try to fine tune your speed (a bit).
- Stay in time. You think your stuff is so important that you need more than the allocated amount of time. Resist, no, keep in time. I need 2 minutes per slide. Presenting 25 slides (which have a purpose ☺) in half an hour is an illusion. Will not work. Do not do it.

7. Enjoy the discussion

- In response to technical questions answer concise and to the point.
- In response to more general questions do not take the opportunity to give a second talk. Try to understand the issue that is put forward, focus the discussion and learn from it. It is perfectly ok to give disclaimers and limit the scope of your conclusions.
- Take notes afterwards. This helps improving your slides to pre-empt questions and prepare slides in reserve for in depth material to be shown as needed.

After doing a lot of hard scientific work, presenting your results is fun. Enjoy!