Presentation Pointers

Basics

1. Start and end your presentation with the **room lights on**. Make at least one opening and one closing statement in the light looking at your audience with your audience looking at you. Your closing statement should repeat the main point or points you are trying to convey or your personal thought about the topic (e.g. "I enjoyed preparing this presentation on Louis Kahn, but I personally think most of his buildings are horrible.")

2. Do not talk to the screen. If you must point to something on the screen, try to keep your comments minimal while you are facing the screen and consider not saying a single word while facing the screen.

3. If not speaking from a podium or lectern, do not pace around excessively.

4. Do not play with your keys or jingle change in your pockets.

5. If there is a fixed microphone or a clip-on microphone, take the time to be sure the position is right and the audience can hear you well. Otherwise, make sure that you project your voice. Some people tend to talk in tiny voices to themselves when they are nervous.

6. If not in total darkness during the talk, look at different areas of the audience and make eye contact with some of the audience as you are speaking (if the room is small enough).

7. If your presentation has different sections or topics, plan to literally change your posture or stance and be sure to announce the change (e.g., "I would now like to switch from DNA sequencing to new evidence for the end of the world."). This helps wake up the sleeping and makes it easier for others to keep focused on what you are covering.

8. Do not drone on and on in the same tone and volume. If certain points are more important or more exciting, make sure your tone and volume change to indicate that. If you are not normally a particularly good speaker and find it hard to do this, consider helpful "tricks." An unemotional, quiet voiced speaker could say, for example, "When all the algae are dead, life as we know will come to an end." And then stop and say nothing for a second or two – long enough for people to notice that the speaker has stopped speaking. Then, the speaker can say, "Let me repeat this key point: when all the algae are dead, life as we know it will come to an end." Even without a loud dramatic voice, the speaker could make sure that everyone got the message.

9. If you want to make a minor comment about something as an aside to your main talk, be sure to let the audience know that that is what you are doing (e.g., "This talk is not about instrumentation, but I just want to point out that on each of the 200 algae settling devices there is this little $29,000 bolt [point to bolt] and now you all know why we

needed significant funding for this project!). After the minor comment or aside, state that you are returning to the main theme (e.g. "Now getting back to irrefutable evidence for the end of the world…")

10. If you are using a laser pointer, do your best to hold it steady (use two hands?) and take your time to point carefully to the detail on your slide. If you are scared witless and shaking like a leaf, don't bother with the laser pointer unless absolutely necessary (just put arrows in your slides!!!) (See also #11 in the next section.)

11. If you have a tendency to say "ah," "uh" or "er" or anything else repeatedly when you speak, get a friend to listen to a practice talk and ring a bell or sound a fog horn or do something loud and jarring every single time you "ah," "uh" or "er." *Deo volente,* this will break you of the habit (or drive everyone deaf in the process).

12. Unless circumstances dictate it, do not read your presentation (e.g. if you are speaking in a nonnative language you may indeed want to read a presentation).

13. Some people like to have presentation notes on index cards. If you use them, make sure you number them! Nervous speakers have a way of dropping things, and numbered cards are a lot easier to put back in proper order than unnumbered cards (especially when you are about to speak!).

14. Try to avoid details that are not appropriate for your audience or for conveying the main points. Your audience may not intuitively know what is important and what is a minor detail and your main message may be diluted (see also #9 above).

15. Do not read all the text on your slides. The audience can read (one hopes). If you just have bullets and are going to explain each point, that is fine. But if there is more text than just bullets, don't read the text verbatim. Just refer to the information on the slide and say what needs to be said beyond what is shown. If there is a long text that you feel must be shown, it would be helpful to give the audience time to read the important text while you remain silent.

16. With or without a slide, introduce your talk and what you are going to cover. If there are two or three main themes or topics, say so. This is often an effective way to start with the lights on so you interact with the audience (see #1 above).

17. If there are questions and answers, and if you are in a large room, be sure to **repeat the question** so that all of the audience knows what question you are answering!

18. Practice the presentation as much as you need to, but do not memorize a written-out text. It would be better to read than to recite what is obviously a memorized talk and usually presenters forget something or get a bit mixed up etc. and it is obvious that they tried to memorize every word.

19. Keep it simple!

20. Make sure the information is being presented in a logical fashion that will make sense to the audience. Some speakers know "their story" so well that they plunge into the "important parts" without much or any introduction for the members of the audience who know absolutely nothing whatsoever about the topic. Other speakers will cover three major aspects of their research project that are quite disparate without explaining to the audience that the three topics are actually related in some way (or, perhaps, that they are actually three different projects that don't have anything whatsoever to do with each other).

21. There is lots of leeway but you need at least one minute per slide and some say allow two minutes per slide. So if you have 133 slides for a 15-minute talk you are an optimist or idiot or an optimistic idiot.

22. Thank yous are important. If appropriate start by thanking those who invited you to speak (not important in a required classroom situation!). Definitely thank all appropriate people who helped you or agencies that provided funding etc. Too many thank you's are better than too few. BUT if you have lots of acknowledgements to make and you list them on one or more slides, don't feel you have to read every single one of them! (For example, "I would like to acknowledge 17 million dollars in research support for my algal studies from these nine agencies [point to slide or motion toward it], but I would like to thank the Adelaide Chapman Endowment for the initial seed funding that helped me get started."   This is far better than reading nine agency names.)

23. Speak slowly and clearly. If you think you normally do not speak slowly and clearly, then ask friends to ring bells or sound fog horns during a practice talk every time you get too fast or too soft (or too loud) etc.

24. After making your final comments with the room lights **on**, end by saying "Thank you" or "Thank you for your attention" or "Thank you for this opportunity to talk about my favorite subject" etc. etc. Do NOT say "That's it" or "That's all" or "Thank you. Are there any questions?" You need to signal the end of your presentation and allow a space for applause (hopefully!).

25. Try to speak good English. Common horrible errors made by SIO PhD students (and many others everywhere) include the following:
a. "Like I said" "Like" is a preposition and introduces a prepositional phrase that does not have verb. "Said" is a verb. "Like I said" is **wrong, wrong, wrong**. Correct: "As I said" "As I have said often" "As she said" "As everyone says" If nothing else, try to never use the word "like" at all and you cannot go wrong.   Correct uses of "like": "Like a donkey" (preposition "like" and object of the preposition "donkey" and no verb!) "Just like a man" "Just like a woman" "The juicy rumor spread like fire through a forest of very dry Eucalyptus."
Again, consider never ever using the word "like", so you are, like, safe from the mistakes and valley talk.

b. "A bacteri**a**" **wrong, wrong, wrong**. Correct **one bacterium, two or more bacteria**; so, "these bacteria are interesting" "This bacteria…" wrong, wrong, wrong. Correct: These bacteria are not interesting.

c. "A alga**e**" **one alga, two or more algae**

d. "**Less** calories" "**less** genes" If you can count things, use **"fewer"** (e.g. fewer calories, fewer gray hairs, fewer coins). If you cannot count things, use "less" (e.g. less hate, less fat, less warmth, less sunshine, less romance, less sex)

e. "several genera**s"** **one genus**, **two or more genera**

f. "I used three standard media**s**" **one medium**, **two or more media**

g. "The data **is** strong" **one datum**, **two or more data**. The data are robust. I don't have enough data yet, but the data I do have are exciting.

h. "further studies" If you want to be really picky, "further" should be used to denote "deeper" or "more thorough" So, you would plan **additional studies** that would **further** explore the mysteries of red alga sex.

i. "This bacterium is very unique." Wrong, wrong, wrong. Correct: This bacterium is unique. Why? If something is unique, it is one of a kind. You cannot be very one of a kind or a little bit one of a kind. Either you are one of a kind or not.

26. If you have any props, have them set up ahead of time.

27. If you use a metal or wooden pointer, be sure to not swing it around unnecessarily or play with it. When not using it, keep it at you side, or set it down.

28. Think about your appearance: a speaker wearing old sweatpants or overly casual attire sends a negative message to the audience.

29. If using your own computer, be sure the wireless connection is turned off so your presentation is not interrupted by incoming emails etc.

30. Don't move too much or too little. Remember "body language" can enhance or weaken your presentation.

31. Some humor – if appropriate – can make your presentation more enjoyable, but no racist or sexist jokes or comments!

32. Beginning with a brief outline of your presentation can be helpful especially if the presentation is a 50 or 60 minute long lecture.

33. For longer presentations consider asking questions to get the audience involved and/or if you introduce strange terms or major points, consider asking the audience to repeat them after you – again, to get audience involvement as well as emphasize the terms or point.

34. Like a good audience member, you should turn off your cell phone and/or pager etc. If there is a potential emergency and you must leave your phone or page on, then explain to audience at the start.

35. When answering questions (see also #17 above) be polite and be controlled. That is, never criticize a question as stupid or inappropriate or in any way "put down" the person asking the question. Similarly, do not show annoyance (in your reaction, comments, or tone of voice), if you don't like a question or the philosophical stance the question reveals (e.g., questions from creationists at a molecular evolution seminar should be handled with tact and diplomacy).

Slides - PowerPoints

1. Never put too much text on a slide and never use small fonts (i.e. smaller than 24 pt according to some experts). (See also #15 above). Similarly, don't put too many graphs on a single slide – bigger individual graphs are easier to see and focusing on one graph at a time may be less overwhelming than seeing four at one time.

2. In Powerpoint avoid giant files (e.g. use JPGs rather than TIFF files). Some suggest a maximum for each slide of 480 x 640 pixels, but the limits may vary with systems being used. Just remember some images are rather gigantic.

3. If you are a MAC user also avoid TIFFs (and maybe any type of image files other than JPGS) because a PC system may not be able to handle them.

4. Keep slides relatively simple so the main ideas are not lost or overwhelmed (see #5 and #6 below).

5. Despite an urge for ultimate creativity, try to standardize the fonts (Arial, sans-serif is a nice clean font; Times is an attractive standard), color schemes, and backgrounds you use in any one talk. It is a distraction to have everything changing in every slide. Make sure your font color can be read against your background color. Remember, some people are color blind! They may not see red text against green. Red and blue together can appear to vibrate and other strange visual aberrations can occur with color! Always using the same font will allow you to pull slides from various presentations and not have to worry about changing fonts!

6. If you use custom animations, have some fun but don't get too carried-away with too many bizarre image entrances and/or sound effects etc.

7. If you use any image or graphic (including graphs and charts) make sure it is large enough to be clearly seen etc. If you have a giant diagram that you must show, use it but highlight the important feature (with a frame or colored background etc.) and then have a second slide that zooms in on whatever detail you want to emphasize so that it is now large enough for people to read or see the information.

8. If your talk is about the math and physics of ocean waves, think about starting and ending with some beautiful wave and beach photos. And maybe insert some half way

through the 47 slides of equations. Granted the audience may be interested in the equations and the hard science, but a little visual relief shouldn't hurt. In educational jargon, this point is known as the "anticipatory set" (that is, "a brief activity or event at the beginning of the lesson that effectively engages all students' attention and focuses their thoughts on the learning objective"). The images provide the audience with a visual context or reference point on which to receive the scientific content.

9. In any presentation, it might be entertaining to include one or more actual cartoons, but be sure they are really appropriate and don't add so many that they will really disrupt the flow of your main message.

10. If your talk deals with one or more organisms (e.g. sexual compatibility between whales and guppies), be sure to include photo images of the organisms even if most of the talk will be DNA sequencing gels and cladograms. Include common and scientific names (underlined or in italics as appropriate) on the slides.

11. If you know well what details you want to point out in each slide, add arrows to the slides and avoid having to use a laser pointer (especially if you are nervous or if you are working with a giant two story tall screen). Having the arrows "fly in" or "dissolve in" (i.e. animations) can be effective, and you can keep adding the arrows as you move from item to item. But don't get carried away with 12 different animations and 12 different sound-effects (swooshes, crashes, etc.).

12. If you do have text slides, introduce each new point on a new slide rather than have all of the points listed on the first slide. Consider de-emphasizing points by changing the font color (e.g. on the fourth slide that shows items 1 through 4, items 1 through 3 should be in white or gray font and the important last item #4 should be in a bright color).

13. If there are typos or mistakes in the slides, just quickly mention them (if necessary) but do NOT belabor the point or apologize profusely. That can detract from the important points, emphasize your sloppiness, and be a waste of your presentation time (bad, bad, bad).

14. Avoid a presentation that is text-heavy by substituting graphics when appropriate. For example, instead of a text-slide reading that "the change in algal densities from 1980 to 2000 was 20% which compared to the change in zooplankton densities over the similar time period, blah, blah, blah" - use a graphic and highlight verbally what is important. A picture or graph is worth 1000 words.

15. When preparing your title slide, add a photo and/or logo from the department and/or university and/or location in which you will be speaking. "Customizing" your title slide with the date and location of the talk, usually goes over well vis-a-vis a generic title slide with no date and location. Similarly, adding the local logo or a very appropriate photo also shows some careful preparation and knowledge of the host institution or event. International hosts will often appreciate the inclusion of a meeting-specific logo (since they probably had quite a time coming up with a beautiful, appropriate logo for the

international meeting). Similarly, they might very much appreciate a photo of their historic campus building or the famous local city hall on your title slide because it shows you did some research on their venue and that you appreciate their logo and/or their venue.

16. If you end with a sunset photo, make fun of it to indicate you know it is a cliché (e.g. "And now let me end with the traditional sunset photo – this one taken on the Island of Santorini - and say that it has been a pleasure to be with you today . . . etc.").

17. Be sure your picture and/or graphs do not "bleed" into the background. For example, if you are using a light-colored photo against a light-colored background, put a think black border or frame around the phot to set it off from the background.