What Makes for a Good Research Presentation?

CS185 Human Computer Interaction

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Preface

- These slides provide an overview of giving an academic talk.
- They are too wordy for a real talk, but I wanted to make them consumable on their own.
- They are meant to offer general guidance. Individuals should tailor these suggestions to their own needs and situations. I generally have job talks in mind, but I hope the slides are helpful for conference presentations and even class lectures.

Three Stages of a Good Talk

- Preparation Before the Talk
- Giving the Talk
- Q &A

Preparation Before the Talk

- Ask about the room, allotted time, and "norms" for your talk
- Consider the audience (general or not)
- For job talks – no "works in progress"
  - Generally, you need to present a solo-authored project (typically from the dissertation)
- Never run long
- Anticipate equipment problems
  - Have a back-up plan in place
- Practice, Practice, Practice!
  - (seriously, practice several times)
  - Even experienced presenters/instructors need to practice

Giving the Talk

- Know your work inside and out
  - Data, methods, measures, descriptive statistics, literature, etc. (Have backup slides)
- Strive for clarity and avoid jargon
- Don’t give handouts at the beginning
  - People will read them rather than listen to you
- Ask that questions be held until the end
- Less important to hit a home run than it is to avoid striking out
- Substance over Methods

Giving the Talk (cont.)

- Get to the point
  - (really nail that first 2-5 minutes)
- Give them a road map and keep on it
  - Avoid tangents, digressions, etc.
- It is O.K. to preview the findings
  - It's not a murder mystery
- Bad jokes are worse than no jokes

Giving the Talk (cont.)

- The talk should make:
  - An important theoretical contribution
  - An important substantive contribution
- Good talks begin with a puzzle, some tension, or a question that captures the attention of the audience.
- Often nice to start with a political story/motivating example.
- Good talks must answer the “So What?” question.

Giving the Talk (cont.)

- A broad question should motivate the talk.
  - Job talks might place that question in a broader research agenda (one or two sentences)
- Your conclusion should return to your answer to that broad question
  - Conclude with implications; don't just rehash in summary
- The middle 80% of your talk is a focused walk through your research.
  - Think "Martini glass" as an outline.
- Furthermore, 80% of your talk should be on your ideas, your work, your findings, etc. and NOT the work of others.

Giving the Talk (cont.)

- Really explain your graphs, figures, and tables
  - E.g. what is the x-axis? What does each number mean
- In other words, really explain your results
  - (don't leave them guessing)
- Do not read long wordy slides
  - Don't even have long wordy slides
  - Long quotes are often a waste of time and space

Giving the Talk (cont.)

- You can't tell them everything.
  - "Less is More" – save the rest for Q&A
- Graphs often say more than tables
- PowerPoint slides and/or overheads need to be readable
  - Don't do this (Table)
  - Or this (Text)
  - Or this (Graphics)

Table 1: Baseline models of factors that influence county-level per capita expenditures in five policy areas

	Agriculture[a]	Crime[b]	Defense[c]	Health[d]	Transportation[e]
$Benefits_{t-1}$	.791 (.001)	1.13 (.001)	.932 (.001)	1.01 (.001)	.554 (.001)
$HR\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}Dem_{t-1}$	61.4 (.001)	-.83 (.353)	58.4 (.064)	-9.13 (.917)	6.25 (.479)
$HR\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}GOP_{t-1}$	59.5 (.001)	2.94 (.003)	70.4 (.060)	95.5 (.393)	2.20 (.809)
$HR\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}Dem_{t-1}$	-----	-----	------	175 (.101)	-----
$HR\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}GOP_{t-1}$	-----	-----	------	-150 (.262)	-----
$SEN\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}Dem_{t-1}$	95.6 (.001)	.491 (.253)	-15.6 (.345)	20.8 (.757)	21.0 (.123)
$SEN\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}GOP_{t-1}$	25.7 (.001)	.029 (.945)	42.2 (.012)	-129 (.027)	11.0 (.317)
$SEN\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}Dem_{t-1}$	-----	-----	------	51.1 (.302)	55.5 (.001)
$SEN\text{-}Com\text{-}Rep\text{-}GOP_{t-1}$	-----	-----	------	-176 (.002)	-.086 (.989)
Dem HR $delegation_{t-1}$	-49.2 (.001)	.004 (.991)	.987 (.966)	-118 (.018)	-7.76 (.145)
HR delegation $ideology_{t-1}$	-.507 (.001)	-.013 (.080)	-1.11 (.015)	-4.55 (.001)	-.478 (.001)
Dem Senate $delegation_{t-1}$	-20.0 (.001)	-.031 (.900)	48.7 (.003)	-45.9 (.235)	-4.31 (.209)
Senate delegation $ideology_{t-1}$	-1.10 (.001)	-.011 (.153)	.616 (.190)	-1.76 (.140)	-.193 (.088)
State Pop_t (millions)	-2.79 (.001)	-.011 (.688)	-5.88 (.001)	-11.8 (.002)	-2.24 (.001)
Constituency $factor_{t-1}$	205.3 (.01)	-23.0 (.001)	37.2 (.003)	284,998 (.001)	513.4 (.001)
Constituency $factor_{t-1}$	-----	126.7 (.001)	.043 (.001)	-8076 (.016)	-----
N	40,334	40,328	34,973	40,251	40,345
Adjusted R^2	.78	.57	.52	.51	.25

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, two-tailed significance levels in parentheses. Models also include year dummy variables. The relevant committees and constituency characteristic variables are, in order:

a House Agriculture Committee, Senate Agriculture Committee, per capita earning from agriculture.

b House Judiciary Committee, Senate Judicial Committee, per capita offenses, per capita police employment.

c House Armed Services Committee, Senate Defense Committee, economic capacity in Gun Belt states, per capita income.

d House Commerce Committee, House Ways and Means Committee, Senate Labor Committee, Senate Finance Committee, doctors per capita, hospital beds per capita.

e House Public Works Committee, Senate Banking Committee, Senate Public Works Committee, per capita income from highway construction.

Giving the Talk (cont.)

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Hypotheses

- The policy balancing theory generates two primary hypotheses:
  - (1) that individuals who prefer that the President and the majority in Congress be from different parties are more likely than individuals who prefer that the President and the congressional majority be from the same party to cast split-ticket votes.
  - (2) that individuals' preferences for partisan control of government are shaped by their own ideological locations and their perceptions of the locations of the two parties

Giving the Talk (cont.)

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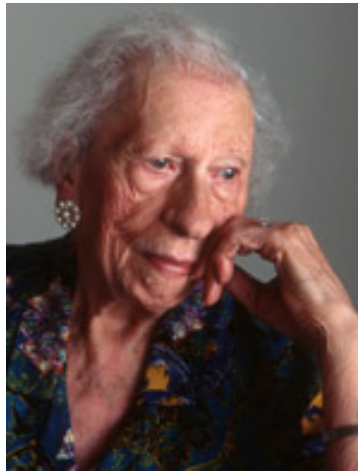
- Politics of the Elderly
  - Life-cycle versus cohort effects
  - Do senior citizens really oppose public school funding?
  - Mobilizing the senior vote



Giving the Talk (cont.)

- People often spend too much time on:
  - The general introduction
  - Their methods
  - The literature
- And too little time on:
  - Their theory
  - Their own findings
  - The important implications of their findings.

Q&A

- Pay attention to the question
- Let people finish their question before you start answering it
- Give direct answers
- Be complete, but don't ramble
- It is O.K. to:
  - Pause
  - Take notes
  - Say "I don't know" (once or twice anyway)
- Keep your cool

Q&A (cont.)

- Try to strike a balance:
  - Defend without becoming defensive
  - Be confident, but not arrogant
  - Accept fair criticism, but don't cave in
  - Q&A should be a conversation among equals
    - (Relax, keep your energy up, and stay cool)

You know something is wrong when questioners ask:

- What is your research question?
- What is your dependent variable?
- What are your conclusions?
- Why should political scientists care about this?
- Nothing at all (at least at job talks)

Closing Thoughts

- Be yourself, but . . .
- Keep your energy up
  - If you appear bored, the audience will be for sure
- Stay positive
  - It should be a conversation, not combat, and it takes two to fight
- Strive for excellence, but remember that perfection is unattainable
- Practice, Practice, Practice!
  - We all have nervous ticks – discover yours and try to minimize them.
- Relax: trust your preparation and your knowledge

For More Information

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