19 A Seminar or Conference Presentation

This chapter aims to help you develop the competencies needed to deliver a presentation at a seminar or at a conference. It covers the following:

- The constraining factors of a presentation
- Features that audience members most dislike in presentations
- Strategies for beginners
- The basic activities: time sequence
- Structuring your presentation
- Designing your slides (PowerPoint or other presentation software)
- Delivering your presentation
- Running out of time
- Answering questions
- Common mistakes
- Checklist

It can be nerve-wracking being faced – perhaps for the first time – with having to present your work orally to an expert audience. The problem can be even worse if English is an additional language for you.

The most common fears are of (1) looking foolish, (2) forgetting what you need to say and (3) feeling exposed because of the primitive fear of everyone's eyes are looking at you. Advice on public presentation of scientific and technical material often appears to forget that much of it can't be put into practice by a beginner. Many students are concerned only about surviving the experience with their credibility intact.

The objective of this chapter

1. This chapter accepts that the thought of public speaking is unsettling or even terrifying. It gives guidelines from this standpoint and tries to avoid giving advice that is of no use to a beginner.
2. The chapter also gives guidelines on common mistakes to avoid. Being aware of the things that people can do when they are nervous can help you avoid or minimise them. This material is based on the feedback that I've given to the graduate student presenters of the many hundreds of presentations that I've seen over the past 15 years.

What this chapter does not do

While it gives guidelines for effective presentation graphics, it doesn't suggest pictorial designs. There is a wealth of online information available; be careful, some is good, some less so.

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The Constraining Factors of a Presentation

1. At a conference, to be able to accommodate the feeling that you're on trial in a strange room with possibly strange equipment.
2. To present your work orally to an audience that might be expert, non-expert or mixed.
3. To be able to present within a fixed time limit. This will probably seem beforehand to be very long but is usually too short when you're doing it.
4. **To remember about a conference punctuation:** A significant number of people in the audience may be used to *reading* English but not be very good at *hearing* and understanding it (see *Eighteen Design Principles for Your Slides*, page 239).

Features that audience members most dislike in presentations

These are common faults. They're not listed here to make you nervous: it is useful to be aware of them so that you can avoid some or all of them, if possible.

1. Too much text on the slides (always the most greatly disliked feature).
2. Text is too small to be read.
3. Text is made up of full sentences instead of brief points.
4. Illustrations are too small, too complicated or not labelled informatively.
5. Material is not presented logically.
6. Poor background and/or colour choices: interference with the text and illustrations.
7. Inappropriate animation effects, e.g. zooming bullet points, unneeded transitions between slides.
8. Reading too much: from either notes, the monitor or the screen.
9. Speaking too quickly and/or too quietly.
10. Standing so that part of the audience's view of the screen is blocked.
11. Not looking at the audience, looking at only one part of the audience or looking at only one person.
12. Continuously swooping the laser pointer over the screen.

Strategies for Beginners

Overview

1. The most effective strategy: Know the first minute of the presentation by heart and the rest of it very well; a sip of water or deep breathing may help.
2. Don't use a written script.
3. Don't worry if your voice sounds funny; it probably won't sound that way to the audience.
4. Take every opportunity to give talks; don't try to avoid them.
5. Be aware of the mistakes people make when nervous.

1. **What can you do about being nervous?**
   Accept that you are probably going to be nervous and have strategies to deal with it.
   In spite of what you may read in some books that say you can convince yourself you're not nervous, there don't seem to be any foolproof methods of doing this.
   The most effective remedy is to accept that if you don't have much experience, you are probably going to be nervous, and that it might hit you very unexpectedly. **Have these strategies in mind to deal with it:**
   - **The most effective strategy** is to know the first minute of your talk by heart, i.e. while your brain is on autopilot, and know the rest of your talk very well.
   - **Knowing that you have a well-prepared presentation.**
   - **Some other techniques that might help** include having a sip of water just before speaking and using deep breathing exercises (it helps some people but beware of hyperventilating).
   - **Preparing for unexpectedly being hit by nervousness**. It also helps to assume that, even if you think you're not going to be nervous, you might suddenly be hit with it at the very last minute, often when the chair announces you.
2. **Don't use a written script.**
   Don't fall into the trap of taking a full script to the presentation, thinking you might forget what to say. Because of nervousness, people often end up reading solidly without looking up. It looks very unprofessional and, if you are being graded for your presentation, you'll be marked down.
   The best way of avoiding a written script is to make sure that everything you need to remember is on your slides, either as very brief points or as illustrations. Then you can get your prompts by glancing briefly at either the monitor or the screen.
3. **Don't worry that your voice might sound funny.**
   You may feel your voice might crack embarrassingly. Don't worry. People won't notice. It is very common to find that members of the audience will tell you afterwards that it was unnoticeable.
   Remember, your voice always sounds very different to you than it does to another person because much of it is transmitted to you through the bones and cavities in your head. What sounds to you like a funny voice may not sound very different from your normal voice to an audience.
4. **As a long-term strategy, present often.**
   Take every opportunity to give talks. It's a tough strategy, but it's only by frequent practice that you will eventually become less nervous. Even very good presenters have felt nervous at the beginning of their careers.
5. **Be aware of the strange things that people can do when they are nervous**, and try to avoid doing them.

The Time Sequence of Activities in a Science Presentation

Overview

Here is a simple list of the sequence of activities in a presentation:

1. **Greet the audience**, say who you are and what you are going to talk about (see *Choice of Words*, page 243).
2. If needed, provide an **Overview/Summary slide** of the whole talk.

3. **Introduction:** Should contain *very brief outlines* of the **context**, the **motivation** and **objective** of your work:
   - **Context:** Overall view of the field.
   - **Motivation:** *Why* you are doing this work: the gap in the knowledge that your work will fill.
   - **Objective**: *What* you are aiming to achieve, the purpose of your work.
4. *Probably:* your **method of approach**.
5. What your **results** were.
6. How you **interpret** your results.
7. The final few minutes, **give your conclusions** from your work in a brief list.
8. **Thank your audience** in very few words (see *Choice of Words*, page 243).
9. **Stop. Remain standing. Don't ask for questions if it's at a conference.**

Structuring Your Presentation

Overview

1. **The major fault with many presentations is the structure of the material**, not the slides or the manner of delivery.
2. **Plan the following:** Your main points, illustrations, the logical thread through it, getting your prompts, the amount of detail, how to greet the audience and take your leave, the structure and the overall sequence of activities.

A presentation will be assessed on whether the audience can readily access and understand the main information. Without a good structure, no amount of colourful slides and confident speaking will make for a professional presentation.

Common major mistake: no obvious logical structure.

Unstructured facts, the main points not being obvious and no clear framework or story are often the main reasons for an ineffective presentation, not the slides or the way you deliver it.

Planning the structure of the presentation

Plan these features:

1. Start by deciding the main points of your talk. Be *very* selective.

Common mistake: Trying to present too much information causing you to almost certainly run out of time and probably confuse the audience.

2. **The illustrations you're going to include:** Schematics, photographs, graphs, etc. Plan the storyline of your presentation around them, as when planning a journal paper (see *How to Start Writing a Journal Paper*, Chapter 6: *A Journal Paper*, page 84).

> **Common mistake:** Far too much text on the slides. Scientific and technical audiences do not like slides that are crammed with text (see *Features that Audience Members Most Dislike in Presentations*, this chapter, page 232). They assess complex material much better through illustrations.

3. **A very logical structure, with a clear storyline.** Choose the illustrations so that the logical thread is obvious.

> **Common mistake:** No obvious framework or storyline is running through it.

4. **The design of your slides.** Choose the template and the colour combinations very carefully (see page 240). For each slide, plan:
   - The illustrations
   - An informative heading
   - Whether very brief written explanations are needed
   - The major points that you need to make while you are speaking about each one.

   See *Designing Your Slides* (*PowerPoint or Other Presentation Software*), page 238.

> **Common mistake:** Poorly designed slides that interfere with the audience's understanding of the material.

5. **Getting your prompts: how to make sure you remember everything you need to say without using notes**. Design your slides so that by briefly glancing at the computer monitor or the projection screen, you'll remember all of the points you need to cover.
   Try not to use a complete script of written notes. Many people do this as a form of security and intend not to use it, but because of nervousness, they end up reading continuously.

> **Common mistake:** Reading solidly without looking up from a script, the monitor or the screen.

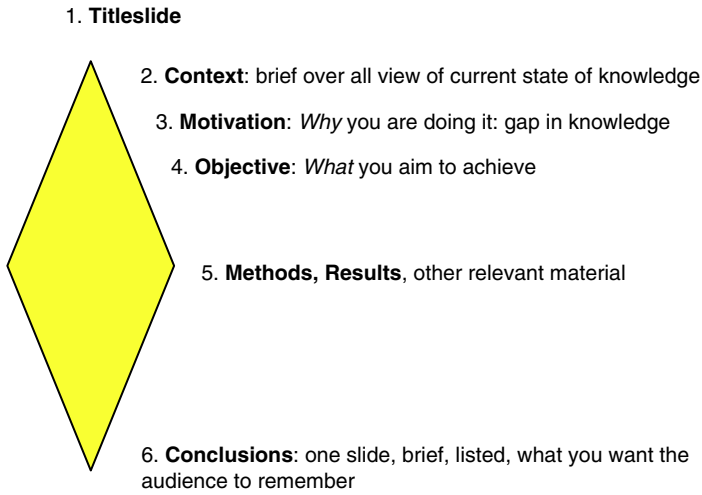

Figure 19.1 Structure your talk like a diamond: present material in this order (1–6).

6. **The amount of detail**
   If you have also written a document on the same topic, be aware that the presentation will need far less detail. You'll need to be very selective. It is a far greater achievement to be able to express a complex idea clearly than to drown the audience in detail.

> **Common mistake:** Far more detail than is needed; the audience becomes lost, and you run out of time.

7. **Professionally greeting the audience at the beginning and taking your leave at the end.**
   See *Delivering Your Presentation*, page 242.

8. **Structure your presentation as a diamond** with the concise material at the beginning and at the end. Present material in the order shown in Figure 19.1.

9. **Overall sequence of activities and information:**
   (a) Title slide and greeting
   Make sure your title slide shows your name, title of the presentation, your institution and city. Include your country if it's an international conference.
   Look directly at the audience (not at the title slide), and then say who you are and what you are going to talk about.
   See *Delivering Your Presentation*, *Opening and Closing*, page 243.
   (b) Outline or Overview slide: a brief summary of all the material
   Some people like these, some don't. It's your choice.
   If you do decide to include an outline slide, make sure it's informative. It should give a summary in a few words of each aspect of your presentation.
   Briefly list the main points that you are going to cover, and then *briefly* explain them.
   Make sure that the information you give on your list of topics is real information. Avoid meaningless headings (Figure 19.2).

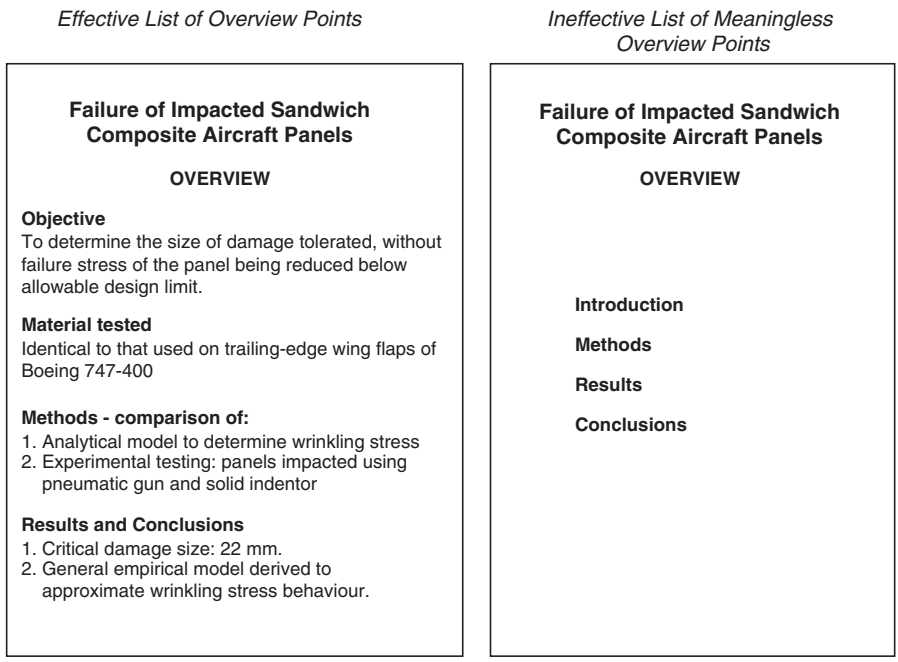

Figure 19.2 The contrast between an effective and an ineffective overview slide.

Common mistake:

To show only a list of bare headings (for example, *Introduction, Methods, Results, Conclusions*) while you say '*This shows an outline of my talk. First I'm going to give an introduction, then I'll describe the methods, then give you my results and finally my conclusions.*' This is a statement of the obvious to the audience and a waste of time for you.

(c) **Introduction**: It should contain the **context** (a brief overall view of the field) followed by the **motivation** of your work (*why* you are investigating it; that is the gap in the knowledge that your work will fill).

(d) Consider having a separate slide titled **Objective** *or* **Aim** giving a clear, brief statement. This is very useful to the audience.

Common mistakes:

- Spending far too long on the introductory material and running out of time. Most of the talk should concentrate on what you have found out. Give only enough background for the audience to be able to place your material in context.
- Having no clear objective.
- Little or no logical structure; no framework on which to hang the story.
- Without a *Conclusions* slide, you leave the audience with no clear main messages to take away.
- If you run out of time, rushing through your remaining slides because you have no *Conclusions* slide (see page 246).

(e) **After the objective, present the main body of the information.** Make sure that in each section, you present the material in an obvious framework, with a clear storyline running through it.

(f) **A concluding slide titled *Conclusions***. A concise list of the conclusions you draw from your material: the points you most want the audience to remember.
This is a very effective way of closing your talk; moreover, this slide will be very important for finishing in a hurry if you run out of time (see page 246).

Designing Your Slides (PowerPoint or Other Presentation Software)

Overview

This section gives 18 fundamental design principles for your slides:

1. How many slides?
2. Make slides uncrowded.
3. Not too much text.
4. Any text should be brief points.
5. Font size large enough for audience to read easily.
6. All key points must be on your slides, not just spoken.
7. Make the key points reinforce what you are saying at any one time.
8. Illustrations clear enough to be readily interpretable by audience.
9. Graphs may need a brief written explanation of meaning.
10. Simple background or template.
11. Maximum contrast with background.
12. Choice of colours.
13. Shaded backgrounds.
14. Use animation functions intelligently.
15. Speaking the detail while showing only general points on screen.
16. Using citations.
17. Proof read the slides.
18. Show where you are in the scheme of the talk.

Eighteen design principles for your slides

There is a wealth of online material about slide design; some material is good and some is questionable. Here are 18 fundamental principles to consider:

1. **How many slides?**
Use as many as you think appropriate to the subject matter and length of the presentation. Some sources say one slide per 2 min. This is misleading because more can be used

provided they are used effectively. However, underestimate the number rather than assume that you can use a lot.

Common mistakes:

Far too many slides, therefore running out of time; hurrying through the remaining slides.
If too few slides, the material looks very thin.

2. **Slides should not be overcrowded and cluttered with information**.

Common mistake: *Far* too much on one slide.

3. **Do not use too much text.**
Science and technical audiences respond far better to illustrations than to reading a mass of text.

Common mistake: Too much text, full sentences and not enough schematics and illustrations.

4. **Any text should be in the form of brief points, not full sentences.**

Common mistake: Long, complete sentences.

5. **The font size should be large enough for the audience to be able to read it easily.**

Common mistake: Font is far too small for the audience to read. Font should be at least 25 point, even for a small seminar room. This will look unnaturally large on your monitor while you are preparing the presentation but will be of minimal size for the audience. **PowerPoint** defaults are 32 point for the main text and 44 point for the title.

6. **All your key points must be visible in brief form on your slides, not just spoken.** It is helpful to all members of the audience but is also essential for two reasons: (1) you can readily get your prompts by glancing at the screen or monitor; (2) it is helpful for the audience members who may not be able to readily understand spoken English.

Common mistake: Forgetting important material that you intended to include because of a lack of prompts.

7. **Make sure that at any point in the talk, you reinforce what you are saying by showing the relevant text and illustrations on the screen.**

> **Common mistake:** Speaking a lot of detail with nothing on the screen to reinforce it. Many members of an audience, particularly at an international conference, may not be able to readily understand spoken English.

8. **The audience must be able to see the relevant detail of the illustrations**: clear points, lines, axes and labelling.

> **Common mistake:** Illustrations that are too complex, too small, too finely drawn or over-enlarged for their resolution. Don't import them straight from a document; they will need thicker lines and larger labelling. Diagrams from the web often have too low of a resolution.

9. **Graphs may need a brief written explanation of the main point(s).** This will be helpful to all members of the audience, particularly those who may not understand spoken English very well such as those at an international conference. They will appreciate a text box under each graph that *briefly* summarises the main conclusion(s) of the graph. An informative heading to the slide also helps.

> **Common mistake:** Only a long, detailed *spoken* explanation of graphs and other diagrams.

10. **Use a simple, uncluttered background or template.**

> **Common mistake:** Complex templates and colours interfering with the readability of both text and illustrations.

11. **Aim for maximum contrast with the background: very dark on very light or vice versa.**

> **Common mistake:** The contrast is often not enough to enable the audience to see the material clearly. What looks clear on a good monitor can look quite different when projected.

12. **Be careful with your choice of colours** for both text and background. Some colour combinations give poor clarity (e.g. red on a blue-hued background).

> **Common mistake:** Material is unclear because of colour interference. Again, be careful: it may look good on your monitor but not when it's projected.

13. **Use shaded backgrounds carefully**. They are very popular and effective, both for the overall background of the slides and for individual text boxes. However, they can lead to problems.

> **Common mistake:** Text and illustrations can easily become unclear on the various areas of shading.

14. **Use the animation functions intelligently**, e.g. to build up complex diagrams or schematics so that each element is brought in sequentially while you speak about each.

> **Common mistake:** Using wild animations purely for dramatic effect. They can be irritating to a technical audience. Make points just appear rather than slide, bounce or zoom in.

15. **Make sure you are not speaking lots of critical detail while showing only general points on the screen.** Every slide should be informative.

> **Common mistake:** Showing general points on the screen and speaking the detail, particularly when describing what a graph shows. Help the audience by having a short line of text under the graph giving the conclusions of the graph.

16. **Use abbreviated citations to other people's work.** If you don't use citations, you are implying that it's your own work. As long as the citations are shown on screen, you can use very small font, e.g. 14 point.

> **Common mistake:** To use an illustration from another source and not cite it. By doing this, you are implying that it is your own work.

17. Proofread your slides.

> **Common mistake:** Typos and spelling mistakes look careless and very unprofessional. You may not notice spelling mistakes, but there will be people who do, some of whom you may need to impress.

18. Show clearly where you are in the scheme of the talk.
Suggestions:

- Use an informative heading for each slide.
- Use a bar at the bottom or side of each slide that highlights where you are at any point in the scheme of the talk. This is invaluable for the audience during a complex talk but pointless if the bar just shows *Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion.*

  Note: PowerPoint does not have an automatic function for doing this. You'll need to make a text box, insert one on each slide, and manually highlight the specific words depending on the individual slide.
  For example, for a presentation on electric vehicles:

> **Common mistake:** People in the audience cannot perceive your progression through the material.

Delivering Your Presentation

Overview

1. Choice of words
   - Open and close professionally.
   - Use spoken English style, not written.
   - Don't be afraid of using *I* or *We.*
   - Use simple, clear words with correct technical vocabulary.
   - Use verbal hints.
   - Don't read out sub-headings.
   - Reinforce main points by showing them on screen.
   - Sound as though you're interested in your work.
2. Your voice
3. The way you stand
4. Your hands
5. Interaction with the screen
6. Looking at the audience
7. Using a pointer
8. Needing to pause

1. ***Choice of words***
   a. **Open and close the presentation in a professional manner.**
      Opening:
      Be professional. This doesn't mean being stiff and stilted; it means all of the following points:
      - When you introduce yourself, show your title slide, and try to look straight at the audience, even if it scares you (see *Eye Contact*, page 245).
      - Don't fluster, mutter or giggle.
      - Say: *Good morning/afternoon. I am (your name). I'm going to present my results on…/ talk about (your topic)*.
      - Then move smoothly into the next slide.

Common mistakes:

- Forgetting to greet; unprofessional greeting.
- Turning immediately to the screen and reading your name and the title.
- With only the title slide on the screen, giving far too much verbal description of the background and motivation to your study. These details should be presented on the subsequent slides.

Closing:
Put up the Conclusions slide (see page 238). *Briefly* run through the points on the slide. Try to avoid reading it word for word. Then just nod your head and say *Thank you*.

Common mistake: Unprofessional closing such as *Well, that's all I've got to say, really* or *That's it – so-um – thank you.*

   b. **Use spoken English style, not written.**
      You should give the impression that you are speaking to the audience, rather than reciting a written script. On the other hand, don't become too colloquial or matey. You'll lose credibility.
   c. **Don't be afraid of using *I* or *We* in a presentation.**
      It livens up a presentation. But don't overdo it, or it might sound childlike.
   d. **Use simple, clear words but include the correct technical vocabulary.**
      Think in terms of the style of comfortable, serious conversation. Imagine yourself explaining your work across a table to a colleague, comfortably and without using colloquialisms.
   e. **Verbal hints are important.**
      They enliven the talk. *This is important because…; This was an interesting result, because…; This was an unexpected result*, etc.
   f. **Don't read out sub-headings.**
      This shows that you've planned your talk in written terms instead of spoken ones, and that you're reading a script.

Common mistake:

With novice speakers, it is common to hear oddities such as:
Sampling methods. Three sampling methods were used…
Design objectives. The design objectives were….

g. Reinforce the main points of what you are saying by simultaneously showing it in brief point form on the screen.
It is not enough for your visual aids to show only diagrams and illustrations. You also need to have text that echoes in brief point form what you are saying at any time.
For example:

- Ineffective: just to say
  There were three reasons why we modified the test rig in this way. The first was we found that… etc., meanwhile counting them off using hand-waving body language, with nothing on the screen. Remember that many in the audience may not fully understand what you are saying.
- Instead, prepare a visual aid that lists it in point form, and expand on each one while you speak. Note: It's important not to read the slide woodenly word for word.

Design of Slide	Possible Spoken Material
Reasons for modifying the test rig:	There were three reasons why we modified the test rig.
1. xxx	The first was …
2. xxx	The second reason was …
3. xxx	The third reason was that…

Common mistake: Insufficient planning of your visual material to ensure that your words are reinforced by the material on the screen leads to an ineffective presentation.

h. Sound as though you are interested in your work.
The audience will find your presentation and your work more appealing if you can manage to sound interested in it. Just try to convey enthusiasm by making your voice and gestures animated without becoming over-enthusiastic. Use verbal hints, too (see page 243).

2. ***Your voice***
If you don't have a microphone, your voice should (1) be louder and slightly more deliberate than in normal conversation; (2) sound lively and convey your interest in your work and (3) not have any verbal tics, e.g. *basically, you know, sort of, like, uuuum, anduuh.*

Common mistakes: When nervous, your voice can speed up, be quieter than usual; become monotonous, crack or wobble.

Remedy for wobbly voice: Don't worry about it; it has to be very bad before it is noticeable to the audience. If you don't believe this, ask your friends after your talk if they noticed anything. They probably didn't.

If English is an additional language: The problem of a quiet, rapid voice is a common one because of either (1) nervousness about making grammatical mistakes or (2) feeling that you are fluent enough but forgetting that you may have a strong accent or slur words together.

Slow down, and try to speak deliberately, positively and more loudly.

Remember, your audience has come to learn about your research; it doesn't matter about grammatical mistakes as long as they can hear and understand it! It is better to say something ungrammatical in a strong voice – your audience will understand and be sympathetic.

3. ***The way you stand***

   Try to stand and move naturally. Be aware of the audience members and try not to block someone's view.

> **Common mistakes:** Standing sideways and not looking at the audience; blocking the view of part of the audience, particularly in a small room; standing rigidly at the computer; crouching over the monitor.

4. ***Your hands***

   Beginners often comment that they suddenly become conscious of their hands and don't know what to do with them. You will probably have a pointing device, which takes care of one hand. Make sure you don't make the usual mistakes with the other.

> **Common mistakes:** Putting them on your hips or hooking the thumbs into your waistband or pockets; fiddling with a pen, or with something in your pocket; worse – clicking a pen.

5. ***Interaction with the screen***

   It is essential to the audience that you interact with the screen and point out the notable features of your visual aids to the audience. But don't look at the screen for long periods.

> **Common mistakes:** Forgetting to point and leaving the audience to navigate their own way through a complex diagram; looking too much at the screen.

6. ***Looking at the audience (often called eye contact)***

   Try to scan around the audience as much as possible, even though it can be very nerve-wracking seeing everyone looking at you.

   Useful tip: If you find that looking at people's eyes is difficult, try looking at the chin/neck region instead. No one will notice that you're not looking straight at them unless they are in the very front of the audience.

   Don't scan above the heads of the people in the back row. This is sometimes given as advice, but you will look spaced out.

Common mistakes: Hardly looking at the audience at all or only very occasionally; looking at the screen too much; looking at only one part or member of the audience.

7. ***Using a pointer***
   You will probably have a laser pointer or – more rarely – a pointing stick. Beginners often don't like using a laser pointer because shaking hands will be obvious. If it is the only pointer available, which is probably the case at a conference, make sure that you don't circle it continuously on the screen in an attempt to disguise the shakes. Just find the item on the screen, and then keep the pointer firmly in the right place for about only two seconds.

Common mistakes: A continuously swooping laser beam (members of the audience find it very distracting); forgetting to turn off the laser spot when you turn away from the screen so that it wanders around; pointing only with your finger (remember your line of sight is different from the audience's); turning your back on the audience too much.

8. ***Needing to pause***
   If you suddenly forget what you want to say, make sure that the audience doesn't notice that you feel flustered. Just say nothing and control your body language. Remember, a pause that seems very long to you will hardly be noticed by the audience if you don't bring it to their attention.

Running Out of Time

Overview

- Common reasons for running out of time
- Formula for finishing professionally in a hurry: go immediately to the *Conclusions* slide.

People frequently run out of time when giving a presentation and then need to finish hurriedly. The following are the most common reasons for running out of time:

1. **Spending too long on the introductory material.**
   Remember, people in the audience *most* want to hear about your results, not lengthy material about other people's work. Give just enough background for them to understand the context and motivation of your work.
2. **Explaining some slides more than you expected to.**
   Remember, it is very easy for unplanned material to come into your mind in the stress of the moment. Remedy this by planning the points you need to make at each slide, and train yourself not to deviate.

3. **Practicing it too fast.**
   When you practice, speak it out loud. If you read it to yourself or whisper it, you go faster than you would when you speak it.

Formula for finishing in a hurry

If you need to finish quickly, don't panic. Use the following three steps. You'll be able to deliver the main points of your presentation to your audience without hurrying, and you'll look professional:

Step 1: When the final signal sounds, don't look disturbed, flustered or say anything; smoothly finish the sentence you're saying and then go immediately to your *Conclusions* slide.
Step 2: Then say something like: *I'm sorry, I don't have the time to show you all of my material. However, the conclusions from this work were…*, and very briefly run through the conclusions.
Step 3: If time is very short indeed, show the conclusions slide for the audience to read, and close your presentation.

Common mistakes: Drawing attention to yourself by flustering; rushing through the remainder of your slides looking for relevant ones.

How to find your *Conclusions* slide immediately

You can do one of two things if you are using PowerPoint:

1. The best solution: Before your presentation, note the number of the *Conclusions* slide (on your hand if you think you'll forget it), and then when you need to finish, type its number and hit *Enter*. You may think this sounds unlikely to work, but it does. Try it!
2. Copy your *Conclusions* slide so that it appears twice: once in its normal position, and also as the very final slide. Then if you need to finish hurriedly, hit the computer's *End* key. This will take you to the final slide.

Answering Questions

Overview

1. Work out the questions you may be asked. Don't be taken by surprise.
2. Use a supplementary set of slides.
3. Make sure you understand the question correctly.
4. Don't be afraid to ask for further clarification.
5. Repeat the question if you think the audience may not have heard it.
6. Be honest if you don't know the answer.
7. Don't be afraid to admit to research problems, but do it positively.

Many students are nervous at the thought of answering questions at the end of a presentation, for two reasons: the fear of not knowing the answer and the fear of not understanding the question, possibly because they have English as an additional language.

The following points will help:

1. **Work out possible questions beforehand.**
2. **Include a supplementary set of slides at the end of your presentation**.
   These can be more detailed and in a smaller font than those of your main presentation. You may not need them; however, it looks very professional to move immediately to a slide that you can use to answer a question.
3. **Make sure that you understand the question correctly**.
   This can be particularly problematic and worrying for speakers of English as an additional language. Do not answer a question until you are sure you have understood it. Be prepared for the questioner who gives a mini-lecture where the main point can often be buried within a long discourse. Ask for further clarification if you have not understood it.

   Suggested wording, said positively:

   I'm sorry; I didn't understand that. Could you repeat it, please?

4. **Don't be afraid to ask for further clarification.**
   If, after the questioner has tried to clarify it, you still don't understand it, don't panic. Turn to the chairperson and calmly ask him or her to clarify it.

   Suggested wording, again said positively:

   I'm sorry; I still didn't understand that. Could you help me, please?

   Make sure you say this strongly, not pathetically.

   Now it's the chair's task to explain it to you. Don't be embarrassed by it. This is completely normal; one of the functions of a chair is to ensure that the session goes smoothly.
5. **Repeat the question if you think the audience may not have heard it.**
   Say The question was '*How does the…?*', and then answer it.
6. **If you don't know the answer to a question, be honest.**
   Don't try to fudge your way through an answer and hope that the audience doesn't notice that you are trying to cover up. It is always very obvious when a speaker is doing this.

   Either say in a positive voice that you don't know, or offer to find out the answer. This is a clear indication of honesty and willingness to communicate the research, and that you are confident in your work.

   I don't know the answer to that question, I'm afraid

   or

   I don't have the answer to that at the moment, but I'll find out for you by tomorrow
   or something similar.

7. **Be honest about your research problems but not negative.**

   Don't be afraid to mention – briefly, objectively and without emotion – any difficulties you may have had with your work. It's not a sign of weakness; everyone in the audience will be able to relate to it, and someone may be able to help. But make sure you don't present yourself as self-pitying.

Checklist for a Presentation

Are you a beginner?

- ☐ Do you know the first minute of the talk by heart?
- ☐ Have you avoided using a written script?
- ☐ Do you know the time sequence of a presentation?

Planning and structuring the presentation

- ☐ Have you decided the main points of your talk?
- ☐ Have you decided on your illustrations and planned your talk around them?
- ☐ Have you been really selective and concentrated on your main points?
- ☐ Have you planned your visual aids so that each key point will be simultaneously spoken and displayed in point form on the screen?
- ☐ Is there a very logical structure, with a clear storyline?
- ☐ Have you checked that you will be able to get all your prompts off your slides?
- ☐ Have you avoided too much detail?
- ☐ Have you planned how to professionally greet and take leave of the audience?
- ☐ Will your *Introduction* very briefly cover the context, motivation and objectives of your work? Perhaps a separate slide for the objectives?
- ☐ Have you got a separate slide for your concisely listed *Conclusions*?
- ☐ If you have an *Overview* slide, does it show meaningful information?

Planning

- ☐ Have you been really selective and concentrated on your main points?
- ☐ Have you planned your visual aids so that each key point will be simultaneously spoken and displayed in point form on the screen?
- ☐ Do you have a title overhead or slide, giving your name, title of the presentation, your institution and city? And country, if it's an international conference?
- ☐ Are you aware of what people can do when they are nervous, and have you planned to avoid them?
- ☐ Have you got a final slide briefly listing your conclusions?
- ☐ Are you planning to use notes? Could you possibly do without notes and take your cues from the audiovisual material?

The presentation itself

- ☐ Have you planned how to professionally greet and take leave of the audience?
- ☐ Are you using the style of spoken English, not pompous written English?
- ☐ Have you planned to look up as much as possible?

Design of your slides

- ☐ Have you got too many to fit into the time?
- ☐ Is the font at least 25 point?
- ☐ Have you avoided cramming too much onto the slides?
- ☐ Is the text in the form of brief points? No long sentences?
- ☐ Are any of your slides too crammed with information? Are all of the slides simply designed and uncrowded?
- ☐ Have you checked that the colour and background of your slides is not going to interfere with your material?
- ☐ Have you aimed for maximum contrast with the background?
- ☐ Will the audience be able to see everything on each slide?
- ☐ Are the text and illustrations large enough for the audience to understand?
- ☐ Have you checked that you can get all your prompts off your slides?
- ☐ Does your title slide show your name, title of the presentation, your institution and city? And your country, if it's an international conference?
- ☐ Will your *Introduction* very briefly cover the context, motivation and objectives of your work? Perhaps a separate slide for the objectives?
- ☐ Have you got a separate slide for your concisely listed *Conclusions*?
- ☐ Are all your key points on the slides?
- ☐ Will each key point be simultaneously spoken and backed up in point form on the screen?
- ☐ Under each graph, have you got a brief written explanation of what it shows?
- ☐ Are you using the animation functions intelligently?
- ☐ Are you planning to avoid showing general material on the screen while speaking the detail?
- ☐ Are you using citations for the material that you copied?
- ☐ Have you proofread the slides?
- ☐ If you have an *Overview* slide, does it show meaningful information?

Delivering your presentation

- ☐ Do you think the volume and speed of your voice are sufficient?
- ☐ Will you try to avoid blocking the screen in a small room?
- ☐ Have you planned to look at the audience when appropriate?
- ☐ If you are using a laser pointer, are you planning to use it so that the spot doesn't constantly flicker over the screen?
- ☐ If you lose your place, have you planned not to fluster and calmly find your place again?
- ☐ Do you sound as though you're interested in your work?

Answering questions

- ☐ Have you worked out beforehand the possible questions?
- ☐ Have you got a supplementary set of more detailed slides that you can use for answering questions?
- ☐ Do you know how to deal with not understanding the questions?