

# How to Present Well (in Economics)

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# Many lessons from writing extend to presenting

- See notes for “How to Write Well (in Economics)”.
  - You want to be brief (your time is often very limited).
  - You want to be clear.
    - Careful, well structured arguments to maximize the chance your audience will understand what you’ve done.

# Know your audience

- You should present differently depending on who your audience is
  - I've presented to general audiences of economists
  - Audiences of specialist labour economists
  - Audiences of policymakers
  - An audience of my dissertation committee
  - Audiences that include students (sometimes grad, sometimes undergrad)
  - I even once presented a paper to an audience almost completely made up of undergrads.
  - I would never give the same talk to two of these groups

# How presentations differ from writing

- They're less formal
  - In a presentation you can sprinkle anecdotes, tell stories, and interact with your audience.
  - An informal (though not too informal) speaking style is generally appreciated.
    - In some disciplines, people read papers (or sections of papers) out loud
    - That's viewed as very poor form in economics

# How presentations differ from class notes

- This document is a set of class notes. It's meant to be projected in class, as well as read at home
  - As a result, I put lots of words on the page so you can read it in your own time and get the full meaning
  - If I were giving seminar, I would have something like 1/4 the words on the page as you see here
  - Bullet points with incomplete sentences. See next slide for an example of how it should look.

# How presentations differ from class notes

- Pure presentation example
  - Few words
  - Incomplete sentences
  - Focus audience on you, not slide
  - Don't read slides!

# How presentations differ from class notes

- The sparseness of the previous slide focuses the audience on the key points, while keeping their focus on you for information.
  - For each bullet point, you may have 5 sentences you want to say. Better to just say them than write them on the slide.
  - You don't need your presentation to be readable at home, because that's what your paper is for.

## Use visual tricks sparingly

- As you can see, I favour an old-school black-on-white presentation.
  - This is partly because I'm slow to adopt fashion.
  - And partly because it minimizes distraction.
  - Slickness isn't good for an academic's credibility
- Things like moving text, text that fades in, etc. are gimmicky. In general, I would avoid these things
- A little colour can be nice, if it's discreet.



## Use visual tricks sparingly

- There may be some value to not revealing slides all at once.
  - Suppose there's a point you need to make very clear that's at the top of a slide.
  - If you think material at the bottom of the slide will distract your audience from the point you're trying to make about the top of the slide, you may want to wait to display that information until you've made your point.
  - Note that it may be better to just put these items on separate slides

## Use figures and graphs carefully

- Someone reading a paper can spend lots of time sorting through graphs and figures
  - Lots of detail can be OK, because they have time to process it. This is not true in a presentation.
  - The pace of your presentation will limit viewer's time to process these visuals
  - Make visuals simple and make them readable (cut the clutter and increase the font)
  - It's your job to talk the audience through a figure or graph to highlight the key message(s)

## Use figures and graphs carefully

- Guiding your audience through visuals:
  - Don't just put up a graph and expect the audience to absorb it.
  - Tell them what they're looking at and what you're going to illustrate.
  - Describe the visual at the most basic level (e.g., tell them what's on the axes, units, etc.)
  - Give a narrative description of what you want readers to see in the visual (e.g., "What I want you to notice here is that crime rates decline starting in 1980, which is 18 years after Roe v. Wade")

# Describing Tables of Coefficient Estimates

- Tables of coefficient estimates can present a particular challenge
  - Don't copy Table X from your paper onto a slide and put it up for the audience! They won't be able to read it.
  - Make a much smaller table that contains the key coefficients of interest, standard errors, and t-stats or p-values. Leave out anything unessential.

# Describing Tables of Coefficient Estimates

- It may pay to highlight (using colour shading, boldface font, or a box) key results that you want people to focus on
  - This is one situation where some visual tricks may actually help a bit
- Tell the audience what they're looking at and what they should take away. "These results are consistent with the story that..."

# Basic organization of a talk

## I. Introduction

- A. If your question is obvious, start off stating your question of interest, and then move on to context and motivation.
- B. If not obvious, give some context/background. Discuss broad trends or issues of interest and use these to motivate your question.
- C. One way or another give context to your question (often a picture or two or an anecdote or two can be useful to grab people's attention)
  - 1. What do we know? What don't we know?
  - 2. Why do we care?
  - 3. How will this contribute to knowledge

# Organization

## I. Introduction (continued)

D. Let us know what others in the literature have found (this may be woven into context)

E. Tell us briefly how you answer the question

1. Sketch methodology, data, etc.

2. Highlight anything methodologically clever or new that you do (this is part of your sales pitch)

F. Tell us what you find (give the punchline up front)

G. If there are obvious “What about this?”

questions, head them off. e.g., “I’ll show you that the following issues don’t drive my results.”

# Organization

## II. Roadmap slide

Many people finish their introduction and put up an outline of their talk so people can see what they're going to cover and when.

Personally, I find it unnecessary and sometimes jarring. But if you were to do it, I would do it at the end of your introduction.



# Organization

## III. Methodology

### A. Lay out any theoretical model

1. Highlight key features of model, don't derive the whole thing
2. Provide intuition wherever possible
3. Explain your modeling choices
4. Show key comparative statics; consider illustrating with some figures
5. Make clear how your model differs from others in the literature (more sales)

# Organization

## III. Methodology (continued)

### B. Lay out any empirical model you use

1. Explain your modeling choices
2. Note hypotheses on coefficient values
3. Explain how your model is similar to or different from existing models
4. Explain how you deal with issues of bias, inconsistency, etc.
5. Convince us that this is the right model to use

# Organization

## III. Methodology (continued)

### C. Data

1. Give necessary details of your data
2. Unit of observation, time span, frequency, variables, any issues we should know about
3. Convince us that this is the best choice of dataset, noting any strengths or weaknesses

# Organization

## IV. Findings

A. Present tables or figures clearly and carefully

B. Make clear what the implications of these findings are

C. Clearly note any caveats

1. Do you have reason to worry about any of your findings?

2. Can you show robustness checks to make people more confident in your findings?

# Organization

- V. Conclusions, Directions for future work
  - A. Summarize your methods and findings
  - B. Note your contribution (sales)
  - C. Discuss areas that should be explored further. Explain why.
  - D. Call for questions

# Organization

- Note that there's no one correct organization of a talk
- The format I laid out here is for a typical applied theory or applied empirical presentation
  - Formats may differ for theoretical econometrics, pure theory
  - See talks by your advisor or others in your field to get a sense of what will work best for you.
  - This is not set in stone, even if you're an applied person

## Some notes on the introduction

- The introduction is by far the hardest part of your talk.
  - You have to get a bunch of people who don't know about your research and probably haven't read your paper to be on the same page with you and each other
  - If you don't get people on the same page, then confusion will reign, and you'll lose people fast
  - When you write and practice your talk, you'll probably spend more than 50% of your time on the introduction

## Some notes on the introduction

- If you do the introduction well, you'll have people eating out of your hand
  - They'll believe your project is valuable
  - They'll believe you're taking a sensible approach
  - Then it becomes easy to describe the research methods and findings
  - A good introduction makes everything that follows seem kind of expected and logical to people
    - Surprise is your enemy in a talk.



# Dealing with Questions

- Economics talks often turn into an exciting back and forth and exchange of ideas between presenter and audience
  - This can be great for you and the audience
  - But audience participation has to be carefully managed
  - Getting derailed by questions is one of the biggest beginner mistakes in giving presentations

# Dealing with Questions

- You don't have to answer a question at the time it's asked
  - Often people ask a question 3 slides ahead of where it's answered. If you can't answer the question in 7 words or less, tell them "I'll answer your question in three slides".
  - Often the answer to a question requires a fair bit of explanation of details that you were going to get to anyway. You've carefully chosen the order in which to present these details. Don't let questions drag you from the optimal ordering.

# Dealing with Questions

- Take time to think about a question before answering (standing in silence is OK)
  - If you take the time to formulate a clear, concise answer to the question, you'll take less time answering the question than if you just start to blurt stuff out
  - Blurting causes confusion, requires clarification, and generally gets you into time trouble
  - Don't go into a long digression to respond to a question unless you know you've got time or you know it's essential to make your response convincing.

# Dealing with Questions

- Don't try to answer a question you don't know the answer to
  - If you fake it, people will probably notice and you'll lose all credibility
  - Better to say, "I need to check my notes..." or "I want to make sure I've got the right answer to that..." and defer answering until after the seminar is over

# Dealing with Questions

- Dealing with a difficult audience member
  - Some people can be jerks in seminar
  - Some people are just persistent and really want to push you on some point of disagreement
  - In order to avoid getting flustered, losing time, or otherwise being derailed by someone like this, there's a handy line you can use. "You raise some interesting points. I want to keep on schedule here, but I'd like to talk to you about this more after seminar. Is that OK?"
    - If it's not, then be firm. "I need to continue now, but I'd be happy to talk to you afterwards." Then continue.

## Things to avoid when presenting

- Talking too fast (remember clarity is vital)
- Talking too quietly
- Talking to your slides (look at your audience)
- Talking to your computer (see above)
- Talking like you're giving a class lecture (don't condescend)
- Talking like you don't believe in yourself (show confidence—if you're having fun your audience probably is too)

# Things to avoid when presenting

- Going overtime
  - This is the cardinal sin of presenting. People hate it when a presenter goes over. It's like a gross violation of property rights. You have been given your 60 minutes to talk. If you take 63, you've stolen those three minutes from everyone else who felt compelled to stay to the end. This is a fairly arrogant thing to do, and it won't go unnoticed. Do whatever it takes to avoid this.

# How to avoid going overtime

- Rehearse extensively (figure out how to say more with fewer words)
- Budget your time for questions (they could easily take a quarter of your allotted time)
- Prepare quick canned answers to obvious questions ahead of time
- Manage questions efficiently during talk
- Have backup plans: know which slides you can skip (and how to transition through skips) if you are running short of time. Practice short and long versions of the talk.



# How to avoid going overtime

- This may seem obvious, but make sure you know how long you have to talk!
  - I occasionally see people in our seminar ask (partway through their talk) “How long do I have left?” even though there’s a clock on the wall. That’s not good time management
  - Ask someone (preferably days ahead of your talk) exactly how much time you have
    - If you have 20 minutes should you talk for 20 minutes? Should you talk for 15 minutes and leave 5 for questions? Will people ask questions in the middle of the talk? Find out!

## Practice is crucial

- There's no better way to get good at a talk than standing in front of a mirror (or better yet, a friend) and giving the talk
  - Don't expect that having a good set of slides will make for a good talk.
  - Just like with writing, you will often have to agonize about the best way to make a complicated point
  - You'll also want to think carefully about the words that bridge you from one slide or one idea to the next.

# Practice is crucial

- Take something simple like a motivating story
  - There's probably a five minute version of the story
  - You'd be better off giving the 45 second version of the story. By doing so, you've just bought yourself 4 minutes and 15 seconds of time you can spend explaining some difficult concept later on in the talk.
  - Take everything you say in your first practice run and figure out how to say it cleaner and snappier

## Practice is crucial

- There's not much more obnoxious than someone who has assembled a room full of people to listen to them, only to treat them to a lousy talk when, with some practice, it could have been a good talk. Consider the implicit wage loss as a result of your audience assembling to hear you. Each person could be making \$100 an hour or more consulting. That's a serious signal of respect they're giving you. Be sure to return it by not wasting their time.

# Practice is crucial

- Try to have your slides for a talk done at least 2 days ahead of the talk.
  - Then practice, rework your slides, and practice more
  - Rehearse difficult sections (the introduction, the technical parts where you want to convey key intuition, anything potentially controversial, etc.)
  - Try to present without notes. This means the words will be a bit different each time, but with practice the really key parts will be close enough to memorized that it won't matter.

# Practice is crucial

- At this point in your career, try to seize opportunities to present.
  - If you're coauthoring with your advisor, ask if you can present the paper at a conference
  - Submit your own work to conferences
  - Give a brownbag talk
  - Take the presentation assignments in this course seriously.