INSIGHTFUL INFORMATION II

Making an Effective Oral or Poster Presentation
A Summary Guide
For Presenters, the Audience, and Session Chairs

by Diola Bagayoko

"Luck is the result of preparation meeting or making, recognizing,
and acting on opportunity."

Introduction

The preparation that goes into making an effective oral (or poster) presentation could easily be the subject of an entire book. A few essentials are noted below to encourage further learning on the subject, partly through practice.

Preparing the Content of the Presentation

It is imperative that you, as the presenter, start as early as possible. Consult faculty mentors, peers, and others with experience in the matter. Understand that CHOICES have to be made in determining the content of a presentation that fits into a given amount of time (e.g., 10 minutes). A corollary is that you cannot cover all aspects of a given topic -- even with a day-long presentation! Some viewgraphs or slides are recommended for most technical presentations. They include the title page, the outline viewgraph, the core of the presentation (in several viewgraphs), a conclusion/summary, and acknowledgment viewgraph(s). These points provide a start for the preparation of viewgraphs.

Title Page

The title page should state (bear) the title of the presentation, in large fonts; with name(s), titles, and affiliations of the presenter(s). Depending on the situation, acknowledgments of colleagues and of funding agencies could be noted at the bottom of the title page. A reference to the meeting/conference where the presentation is given (with specification of city and state/country) and a date are desirable.

Outline

The outline simply lists the major parts of the presentation in the order in which they will appear.

Core of the Presentation

The viewgraphs for the core of the presentation must address key *experimental set-up, instrumentation, procedures, tasks, methods of analysis, major findings, and a comparison of these findings with previous ones, if any.* An introduction helps lead to the core of the presentation. Coherence, in going from one viewgraph to the next, facilitates understanding. Do not confuse covering a topic with going into minutia; focus on the essentials. While the other viewgraphs are important, the scientific/engineering value of the presentation is mostly determined by the ones dealing with the core of the presentation.

Conclusion or Summary

The conclusion is expected to summarize the major steps and findings that were discussed and to point, if applicable, to some future direction for further studies. Do not confuse this point with going into the details of something that was not presented.

Acknowledgements

Presenters are to acknowledge individuals, organizations, colleagues, etc. that contributed to or supported financially or otherwise the work that was presented. An example of other support is the hospitality of an instrumentation center where measurements were made. The same is true for research, study centers which served as a host for the presenter(s).

Whatever is not readable from the back of the room or auditorium should not be on a viewgraph, if at all possible. CLARITY IS A NEEDED QUALITY OF EVERY VIEWGRAPH. *One of the reasons for starting your preparation as early as possible is the need to make some complicated diagrams, graphs, and tables that meet the clarity requirement. Graphics software products, such as Harvard Graphics, Lotus 123, Microsoft Powerpoint, MacDraw, etc., can be learned with practice. Most of them are menu-driven and one only needs to follow the icons to be successful.*

 Rehearsing the Presentation.

After taking the first step of preparing the presentation, it is time to practice. Recruit colleagues, peers, or family members to be the audience. If this is not possible, then imagine that an audience is listening to you! This rehearsal or practice has to pay attention to the following points:

> * The audience must hear the speaker;
>
> * For every table, make sure that the content is noted - name quantities or variables for which data are shown;
>
> * For every graph, the variables on the coordinate axes must be identified and the units should generally be spelled out;
>
> * Do not miss the opportunity when discussing graphs and tables to note salient features that have a bearing on your key findings and/or your conclusion;
>
> * All the viewgraphs or slides have to be presented in the allotted time. If that is not the case, then the following remedies may apply: either increase the speed of the delivery or decrease the number of viewgraphs or slides.

Some successful presenters suggest one minute per viewgraph as an average. It is imperative to understand that going over the time limit in professional arenas indicates a lack of preparation. It does not denote any singular importance of the presenter or presentation!

The Untold Story of Making a Presentation

 Making a presentation is a very sophisticated human endeavor. There are still a few points you need to note.

 No one knows everything, including a professor, scientist, or engineer making a presentation on his/her research findings. This point means that if there are some questions you cannot answer, there is nothing about which to be ashamed. In fact, the ones who never got questions they could not answer are often the same ones who did not present much of anything. JUST MAKE SURE THAT YOU PREPARE THE BEST YOU CAN. Do not pretend to know more than you do by using words or terms in your presentation whose meaning you do not know.

 It is a good rule of practice not to eat one or two hours before a presentation. The **stomach** is a key player in making a speech. This rule applies to all kinds of presentations. And if you have to present without a sound amplification system and for a large audience, then make sure you are almost hungry at the time of the presentation. Is it suggested here that one has to fast before a presentation? No, but simple physics is saying that room is needed in the stomach for air to make a clear speech. Besides, the discomfort of a stuffed stomach does not help, nor does the drowsiness that accompanies the same. Crying, dancing, or torturing yourself afterward does not change an error or a mistake, once it is made. A mistake during a presentation does not invalidate the rest of the presentation. Remember to learn from the experience as opposed to making it a crippling episode. Those who never make mistakes are often the same ones who never do anything complex. Preparing and delivering the best you can is all the audience expects from you.

The Audience and Session Chairs

 Take this opportunity to listen, to view, to take notes, and to learn. Remember, the professors in the audience do not understand everything either, particularly if the topic is not their specialty. If the presentation is not in your major but you listen carefully, you are still likely to learn something. Albert Einstein once said that great discoveries are waiting at the frontiers between disciplines. Avoid side talks while a presentation is taking place. Session chairs are in charge of maintaining the professional atmosphere and standards for the presentations. They professionally enforce time limits whether anyone likes it or not.