

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### How to present a paper at a scientific meeting

#### By

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This is the last article in a series of 10 articles on surgical research. The series covered several aspects of surgical research starting with how to write a surgical research proposal, passing by issues related to research design and statistical analysis, writing the surgical paper and now ending by how to present surgical research at a scientific meeting.

#### **Abstract submission**

The first step to do once you have decided to present your surgical research at a particular scientific meeting (after two years of hard work on your research!) is to read the published guidelines for abstract submission for that particular meeting. The last thing you want is that your precious research to be rejected for the simple matter that you did not care to read the abstract submission guidelines. You should also send the appropriate number of copies. Anonymous copies without the names of the author and the institution where the work was carried out, are often requested to ensure that the marking system is independent and fair. Make careful note of the deadline; late entries may be rejected out of hand without evaluation.

#### **Abstract form**

An abstract form commonly includes the following items:

1. Title
2. Authors
3. Institution
4. Abstract text
5. Subject categories

#### **Title**

A title should be brief - maximum information in fewer words. It is advisable not to exceed 15 words. Avoid excessive adjectives and noun strings as short titles are clearer and more arresting. Ideally a title should convey the research question, area of research and research method.

## **Authors**

All authors involved in the research should be listed. Authors listed on the left would have had a more practical role in the research while authors listed on the right would have had a more advisory role. The presenting author should be marked (usually underlined).

## **Institution**

The institution name and address where the work was done is written down. When several institutions are involved mention the institution where most of the work was done.

## **Text**

Abstract text is nowadays structured, which means that the text is presented under several subheadings. First, the aim which states why the study was done. Second, the method, which states what was done. Third, results which states what was found. Fourth, conclusion which states what was concluded. Your abstract should not in any circumstances exceed the allocated space or word count ( $\leq 200$  words) as it could result in its rejection.

## **Subject categories**

A number of subject categories are listed and you are asked to choose the most appropriate category that fits your research. This facilitates proper abstract evaluation and placement.

## **Presentation preparation**

The production of an oral presentation for a scientific meeting usually follows three distinct stages:

1. Presentation data selection
2. Presentation structure
3. Presentation practice

## **Presentation data selection**

A presentation usually lasts 10-15 minutes. Therefore, you will not be able to present all your data. You have to look at your research data critically and select the most important and most original data. You are better off being remembered for one or two significant findings than for many findings which your audience will easily struggle to remember by the end of your presentation.

## **Presentation structure**

An oral presentation is composed of an introduction, message (body), and conclusion. Each section has targets of its own, however, one target common to all is to make sure that your audience gets the main message during each section of your presentation. In other words; first, tell them what you are going to tell them, second, tell them, third, tell them what you have told them!

## **Introduction**

Your aim during this part of your presentation is to introduce yourself and get the attention of your audience by stating what you hope to achieve in your presentation and what you intend to cover.

## **Message**

The aim of this part is to present your hypothesis followed by your observations. There is usually no time to go through the material and methods as in a written paper. The audience is more interested in the results. Data should be presented clearly and in sequence of events. A successful message should not contain more than 4-5 main findings.

## **Conclusion**

Do not tell the audience beforehand that you will conclude your presentation as they will switch off. Summarise what you have said, get their attention, and finish with a clear conclusion

## Presentation practice

Practice is the secret to a successful presentation. Practice aloud using your own words. Do not read your slides as that puts off the audience. Listen and time to yourself using a tape recorder and allowing 45 seconds per slide. Modify your presentation accordingly and practice, practice, practice. Start preparing 4 weeks in advance.

## Presentation Checklist

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Is the aim of the lecture clear?  | 10. Is the title too general/ too wordy/ inaccurate?                              |
| 2. Is the purpose stated?  | 11. Are there too many or too few references to previous work?                    |
| 3. Are all questions answered?   | 12. Is the pace adjusted to the complexity of the material?                       |
| 4. Are all elements to interest the audience during the introduction included? | 13. Is there sufficient explanation of complex ideas?                             |
| 5. Is the material presented in the best order?                                | 14. If several authors are involved have they been given recognition?             |
| 6. Should material be added or removed?  | 15. Is the lecture a complete unit without obvious jumps in changes of direction? |
| 7. Are any statements contradictory?   | 16. Is there redundancy?  |
| 8. Is it worded effectively and accurately?                                    | 17. Will the theme be remembered?   |
| 9. Are there enough or too many slides?  | 18. Could you do better?  |

## Slide format

### Language

Your language should be punchy and concise. Therefore, use short titles, condense paragraphs into sentences, condense sentences into phrases, condense phrases into key words. Use bullets to highlight key ideas. Use full stops after quoted statements only.

### Text

Limit the number of text lines to seven and limit text line length to seven words (36 characters). Think big with letter size: Title - 36 pt, body text - 24-30 pt, captions- 24 pt.

Anything less than 24 pt will not be easily read. Use the ruler and tabs, not the space bar as that guarantees symmetry on the screen. Use the same font throughout your slides.

It is advisable to use Sans serif fonts such as Ariel and Comic Sans MS as they are more readable than Serif faces such as Times New Roman. Use mixed upper and lower cases, not all capitals

### Tables

Avoid tables whenever possible as they are difficult to read. Never use tables with more than three columns and seven lines including table title and its footnote. Use the whole surface of the slide for table construction to make sure its content is readable. Do not draw an outer box as it uses valuable space. Do not use inner lines as they are a cause of distraction. Approximate numerical data to avoid using decimal points. If data exceeds this format subdivide your results into several tables. A bad table is the worst possible slide (torture)

### Graphs

Graphs make good slides. Use minimal labeling for clarity. Different lines or fill styles are preferable to different colours. Pie charts are used to compare the parts of a whole. Vertical bars are used to compare data that change over time. Horizontal bars are used to compare data that don't involve time. Line charts are used to show trends in data over time. Error bars are used to

display data and standard deviation or error. Box plots are used to display the median, interquartile range, minimum, and maximum values of data. Scatter plots are used to show correlation between two sets of data. Survival curves are used to display probability of patient survival. Flow charts are used to show successive stages of a process.

### **Photographs**

Good clinical photographs enlighten the audience and could enliven your presentation. Surgical photographs are best for surface demonstration as in plastic or hand surgery, however, they always fail with complex surgical cavity procedures. Pathological specimens, histological slides and X-rays are highly photogenic and should be used when relevant. Do not bore the audience with repeated photographs especially if the first has delivered your message.

### **Diagrams and cartoons**

Difficult subjects can be made easy through diagrams. Do not use cartoons to be funny but to convey a message

### **Colour and background**

Colour and background choice depends on personal taste, however, it is advisable to use one colour or background for your presentation. Avoid complex backgrounds as they distract from the slide data. Beware of using different colours or backgrounds as audience may assume that the slides have been collected from several previous presentations.

### **Filler slides**

Filler slides should not be used at hoc. They are usually used when your need to change the direction of the presentation, give a summary, buy time while maintaining full audience attention. Filler slides can be made of plain colour, word summaries, or pictures.

## **Slide Rules**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Do not overcrowd  | 12. Use colour with purpose and not for mere decoration   |
| 2. Make the slides simple and pictorial  | 13. When making slides of photographs or X-rays cut out any excess film before making the slide. This will magnify the area you really want to show.          |
| 3. Avoid verbal slides, words are to be heard not to be seen and read                                    | 14. Never use serial numbers on slides. Avoid dates if possible.  |
| 4. Avoid tables  | 15. Do not use left-over slide from previous presentations  |
| 5. Try to use diagrams   | 16. Never track back to previous slides. Have duplicates to insert in the right place   |
| 6. Labelling should be minimal and lettering in lower case   | 17. Each letter should be 5% of the height of the artwork for good visibility   |
| 7. Curve charts are used to express changes against time, do not plot more than two curves on each chart | 18. Above all, decide what you want to show and how you want to show it. If you are not clear in your own mind, no slide will do the job of thinking for you. |
| 8. Column, bar and pie charts are for making comparisons   | 19. Make sure all slides are put in the right order and that they will not be shown upside-down.  |
| 9. Use special statistical slides only when appropriate and explain them                                 |   |
| 10. When using photographs, not all subjects are equally photogenic                                      |   |
| 11. Do not waste space on the slide; fill the whole viewing area   |   |

## Presentation delivery

It should be emphasized here that papers at scientific meetings should be delivered and not read. Audience all over the world get uniformly bored by hearing presenters read their talk from the projected slides. The audience's eyes are quicker than your lips. They will be waiting for your next slide before you have even finished reading your first slide. This is the situation which you must avoid at all cost. The only way to overcome this problem is to practice your presentation and memorize, to a certain extent, what you intend to say for each slide. It is not an easy task but it gets easier every time you present a paper at a scientific meeting.

## Greeting

Always start your oral presentation with a salutation: 'Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen' Remember to thank the chairman if he praised you while introducing you to the audience

## Voice clarity, volume, tone, and pace

Nobody in the audience will follow a speaker which cannot be understood well. Clear diction is vital so please control your lips, teeth and tongue! Make your presentation simple by using familiar language. Voice volume is another important issue and it is the amount of sound emitted by the speaker. The goal is to be heard without shouting. You can sometimes lower your voice to draw the attention of the audience after which you raise it to make your point. Voice tone (modulation of the voice) is used to express the speaker's state of vigour, decisiveness, or sentiment. Beware that a tone that carries fear will frighten the audience. You have to adjust your voice to a suitable pace of 100-200 words-a-minute. You can higher your pace to convey enthusiasm or lower it to emphasize key points or issues

You can follow this simple guide for voice pace which is based on subject familiarity and complexity:

Subject Unfamiliar	Subject Complex	Pace (rate)
Yes	Yes	Begin slowly, continue at a slow pace
Yes	No	Begin slowly, continue at a normal pace
No	Yes	Begin at a normal pace, continue at a slower pace
No	No	Begin at a rapid pace, continue at a rapid pace

## Personal appearance

Personal appearance is important as first impressions are difficult to change so please dress neatly and tidy. Carry yourself in a confident and professional manner. Stand up straight, with feet slightly apart, with your jacket buttoned-up. Do not put your hands in your pockets as that conveys the wrong messages (too relaxed or shaking hands!)

## Eye contact

Keep eye contact with all your audience. Speak to those in the front and back rows and to those on your left and right. This will keep them alert, make them feel part of your presentation and give them confidence in you. Monitor the audience's reaction to what you are saying and adjust accordingly. Do not stare as that intimidates the audience. Do not move your eyes from side to side as that distracts them. Do not look out of the window or at the clock as that gives the audience the impression that you are bored with your presentation. Do not look only at the screen during your presentation as that is impolite. Do not look at your feet or at the ceiling too often as that conveys nervousness or timidity

## **Gestures**

Use meaningful and appropriate gestures to make a point. Avoid using gestures that indicate your frustration. Do not play with keys or coins in your pocket. Do not use your hands too much, touch your nose or ears. Beware of excessive and excessive coughing. Do not excessively use the pointer on the screen.

## **Questions**

It is good policy to allow time at the end of your presentation for questions. Repeat the question you have been asked to make sure that everyone has heard it. First, pause to think before starting to answer and then direct your answer to the entire audience. Try to relate your answers to your presentation. Answers that last 10-40 seconds work best.

If someone in the audience disagrees with you, try to find a way to agree with part of their argument. If you happen to not know the answer, tell your audience so. They will love you for your frankness.

## **Nervousness**

Your main enemy during a presentation is tension. You have to turn nervousness into positive energy. You can reduce tension by performing relaxation exercises before your presentation. However, knowing your material well and concentrating on your message are your best options. Don't worry too much as most people will not notice your nervousness

## **The day of the lecture**

Check the order of your slides at home. Submit your presentation in due time and make sure that there are no technical or electronic incompatibility with the conference's machinery or computers. If you are going to use a slide projector make sure that your slides are put in the slide holder in the right position. Visit the lecture hall before hand and familiarize yourself with its facilities. Get to know the chairman and the other speakers as they arrive. Make an effort to introduce your self to the chairman and other speakers. This will make you feel more confident and initiate a friendly atmosphere in the lecture hall. Good luck

## **Ten Golden Advice**

- Look good and feel good
- Speak clearly
- Prepare thoroughly
- Allow sufficient time
- Rehearse frequently
- Arrange sequences logically
- Be selective in material
- Use the visual aid
- Answer questions with charity
- Be friendly, humorous and kindly