

# How to Present Well (in Economics)

The class notes (i.e. long) version

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Martin Farnham

University of Victoria

# Why present?

To start a conversation about your research.

- Share your ideas with others.
- Gather ideas (questions/feedback) from the audience.
- Agglomeration benefits of many people thinking about your question together.

To showcase your skills (especially if it's a job talk).

To convince people you have an interesting question and strategy to answer it.

- As with a paper, part of your job in giving a talk is to *sell* your research question and your approach to answering it.
- Be aware that there's a fine line between honest and enthusiastic promotion of your ideas and overselling.
  - Be up front about weaknesses in your approach (don't oversell).
  - Be sure to highlight the contributions you're making to knowledge (don't undersell).

(in the case of a job talk) To convince people you can explain complicated ideas clearly—i.e., that you would be a good teacher/colleague!

# As with writing, key goals are *brevity*, *clarity*, and *engagement*.

## *Brevity*

- Time is limited and it's bad form to run overtime.
- Even if you finish on time, if you wasted time explaining something in 4 minutes when it could have been done just as well in 3, that's 1 minute worth of interesting material or discussion you gave up the opportunity to present.
- Think carefully about what to include and what to leave out.

## *Clarity*

- Use careful, well structured arguments to maximize the chance that your audience will understand what you've done.
- Think carefully about how to sequence the information you present, so that people have the appropriate background to understand the points you make at the time you make them.

## *Engagement.*

- Especially important for presentations.
- Communicate in a way that piques audience interest in your work.

# 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 academic disciplines, people read papers (or sections of papers) out loud.
  - That's generally viewed as poor form in economics.

## They're meant to promote a conversation

- Econ seminars are typically expected to involve a lot of back and forth between speaker and audience.
- Note that the back and forth should be constructive...not about point scoring.
- If your audience is engaged, they will ask questions and make suggestions.
- This can be the highlight of a good talk.
- A lack of back-and-forth can be a sign of either a bad presentation or a bad audience.
- In the best seminars, everyone is working hard!

# How presentation slides differ from class notes

Seminar presentation slides should be sparse to keep the audience focused on what you say, not what's on the slide.

This document is a set of class notes (for a couple research methods seminars that I teach). It's meant to be projected in class, but also to be read by students 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 a research seminar, I would have something like 1/4 to 1/2 the words you see here.
- Bullet points with incomplete sentences. See next slide for an example of how this would look.

# How presentation slides differ from class notes (example—compare with previous)

Class slides wordier than seminar slides

- Facilitates reading at home

Presentation slides use bullet points/incomplete sentences

- Main ideas only
- Keeps you focused on audience
- Keeps audience focused on you
- Don't read slides!
- Face/engage audience.

# How presentation slides differ from class notes

Note academic presentations are usually made to people who know less about your specific research question than you, but who are often more experienced than you and who may have broader knowledge of the general subfield than you.

- Don't talk to them the way you talk to a class of undergrads
- Explain things as carefully as you need to, but avoid being condescending.

# Know your audience

You should present different material (and present differently) depending where you're presenting and who your audience is.

Examples:

- A job market seminar: General audience of academic economists (60-90 mins)
- Society of Labor Economists (SoLE) Meetings: Labour economics specialists (20 mins).
- CEA meetings: academic economists, public servants, private sector, think tanks (15-20 mins)
- House of Commons Committee: politicians.
- Classroom: students

Ask the organizer of your talk--well ahead of time--who to expect as your audience. Optimize accordingly.



# Connect with your audience

Make paper available ahead of time (on your website or emailed to seminar organizer well in advance) so the audience has skimmed it at least. Make sure it has a great introduction as that's what most people will read.

Try to avoid hiding behind a lectern (or your laptop) at the front of the room.

Allow yourself to move around a bit; it will likely relax you and your audience.

If you're comfortable with it, make eye contact with your audience.

- It engages them and keeps them focused on you and away from their phone/email.
- It makes them feel that you're talking to them individually, not just broadcasting to the room.
- It sends a signal that you would be an engaging teacher and colleague.

Can you make connections between your research and that of audience members?

# Use visual tricks sparingly

As you can see, I use a fairly old-school presentation style.

- 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.

It's gimmicky to use things like moving text, text that fades in, etc. In general, avoid these things.

A little colour can be nice, but don't overdo it.

Links that allow you to jump from one part of the presentation to another smoothly can be handy and can streamline things.

A table of contents at the top of each slide that shows where you are in the presentation can be useful for keeping you on schedule. Packages like Beamer make this easy.

- Some people show paper title and authors on each page, which might be useful (e.g., if someone walks in late).

# Use visual tricks sparingly

There may be some value to not revealing all of a slide at once.

- Suppose there's a complicated point you need to make sure people understand 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 at the top of the slide, you may want to wait to display that information until you've made your point.
- So, for example, you might first display the first half of the slide, and then later display the second half.
- Note that it may be better to just put these items on separate slides.

# Use figures and graphs carefully

Someone reading through a paper can spend lots of time sorting through figures and graphs at their own pace.

- Lots of detail can be OK, because the reader has time to process it. This is not true in a presentation.
- The pace of your presentation limits viewers' time to process visuals.
- Make visuals simple and readable (cut the clutter, increase the font).
- Talk the audience through a figure or graph to highlight the key message(s) and focus the audience's attention appropriately.
  - Don't assume they'll be able to easily understand it, even if it seems obvious to you.
  - Everything seems obvious to you, because you know the subject from months or years of work. Your audience is seeing it for the first time.

# Use figures and graphs carefully

## Guiding your audience through visuals:

- Don't just put up a graph and expect your audience to absorb it.
- Tell them what they're looking at and what you're trying 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 the readers to see in the visual (e.g., "What I want you to notice here is that crime rates decline in the first three years after the policy is implemented, but then begin to rise again.")
- Make sure to use a laser pointer (or your hand if you're close to the screen) to draw the audience's attention to exactly what you want them focused on. Know ahead of time how that laser pointer works.

Don't rush!

# 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 sparser table that contains only the key coefficients of interest, standard errors, and t-stats or p-values (or significance asterisks). Leave out anything unessential. Less is more.
- Or use a visual representation of coefficient estimates (whisker diagram with confidence intervals).

# 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 place where some visual tricks may help a bit.

Tell the audience what they're looking at and what they should take away from it. "These results are consistent with the theory that..."

# Don't rush through essential slides

For example, if you're doing an empirical paper there will be an empirical model that you're estimating and you'll have a slide with that equation on it.

Don't throw up the equation, say "Here's my model" and move on.

Spend time talking people through it so everyone knows exactly what you're estimating. It's obvious to you, but not to your audience.

- Define key variables (on the slide and with your voice).
- Remind people what the unit of observation is.
- Discuss the key coefficients that you're going to be estimating and what signs or values theory might predict.
- Explain how the specification relates to your identification strategy.
- You might spend more time on this slide than any other side in your presentation.



# Basic organization of a talk

## I. Introduction

- A. If your question is obvious, start off clearly stating your question of interest, and then move onto the 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?
  2. Why do we care? ← Arguably the most important part of your talk!
  3. How does answering your question contribute to knowledge?

# Organization

## I. Introduction (continued)

D. Let us know key things that others in the literature have found (this may be woven into context). But don't give a full literature review (save that for the paper)!

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 briefly the key things 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 empirical 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 kind of jarring. But if you were to do it, put it at the end of your introduction.

Note: Some papers will have a discussion of institutional details (say of a policy) that's needed to motivate the theoretical or empirical approach. That generally would come shortly after the introduction.

# Organization

## III. Methodology

### A. Lay out any theoretical model

1. Highlight key features of model; don't build up the entire thing and derive all the comparative statics for your audience.
2. Provide intuition wherever possible. Especially with a technical paper, this is essential.
3. Explain your modelling choices.
4. Show key comparative statics; perhaps illustrate 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 that you use.

1. Explain your modelling choices
2. Note any 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 your audience that this is the best (feasible) model for you to use.

# Organization

## III. Methodology (continued)

### C. Data

1. Give (only) necessary details of your data.
2. Unit of observation, time span, frequency, key variables, any issues we should know about (response rates, sample selection).
3. Convince your audience 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 implication(s) of these findings are.
- C. Clearly note any caveats
  - 1. Do you have any reason to worry about any of your findings?
  - 2. Can you show (or at least mention) robustness checks that would make the audience more confident in your findings?

# Organization

## V. Conclusions, Directions for further work

- A. Summarize your methods and findings.
- B. Note your contributions (sales)
- C. Discuss areas that should be explored further. Explain why.
- D. If it's a job talk, it's a good idea at the start and/or finish to discuss briefly your broader research agenda. If you can credibly convince your audience that this is one of a string of papers that you're likely to produce in this area, that's very useful.
- E. Call for questions.



# Organization

Note that there's no one correct organization of a talk.

The format I lay 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.
- There may be particular issues (e.g., institutional or policy details) that you need to spend time on.

# Some notes on the introduction

The introduction is usually 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 or get derailed by questions.
- 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 the audience 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 in detail.
- 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.
- Audience members asking questions is often a sign of interest and engagement, which is what you want.
- But audience participation has to be carefully managed.
- Getting derailed (especially timewise) with questions is one of the biggest beginner mistakes in giving presentations.

# Dealing with questions

You don't always 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 very quickly, then simply say, "I'll answer that question in 3 slides, but I've got a little more background I want to give people first." or "That's a great question. I'm going to have you hold onto that until I've described my methods, and then you can tell me if I've failed to address your question fully."
- Often the answer to a question requires a fair bit of explanation of material that you haven't yet got to. 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 the question before answering  
(standing in silence is OK)

- If you take 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 tends to cause confusion, often requires clarification, and can get you into time trouble.
- Don't go into a long digression to answer a question unless you know you've got time *and* that the digression is essential to your answer.

# 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 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 later.

Always come to seminar with a notepad and pen. This way you can scribble down ideas or questions to come back to.

- If you have a friend in the audience you can ask them to take notes for you.
- The added benefit of taking your own notes is that it sends a visual signal of respect to your audience—that you value their ideas and that you're learning from them.

# Dealing with questions

## Dealing with a difficult audience member

- Some people can be jerks in presentations.
- Some aren't jerks but are very persistent and don't want to let go of 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 an interesting point. I want to keep on schedule, but I'd like to talk to you more about this after my talk. Is that OK?"
  - If it's not, then be firm but calm: "I really need to continue now, but I'd be happy to discuss this with you afterwards." Then turn back to the rest of the audience and continue.



# Things to avoid when presenting

Talking too fast. Clarity is vital! Be mindful of your pace when nerves set in.

Talking too quietly. Project clearly to the farthest audience member.

Talking to your slides (look at your audience instead)

Talking to your computer screen (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 act credibly confident in your work, the audience is more likely to have confidence in your work)

# Things to avoid when presenting

Slouching. Stand tall! Practice in the classroom before you're on the market!

Using fonts that are too small. Show empathy for aging members of the hiring committee!

Standing in the way of the projection screen. It makes you look spooky and it blocks the view of your slides.

Don't forget to repeat questions so the whole audience can hear the question you're answering. This is an important skill in the classroom, so demonstrate that you've got that skill down.

# Things to avoid when presenting

## Going overtime

- This is a cardinal sin of presenting. Lots of people hate it when a presenter goes over. Many people (myself included!) view it as a violation of property rights. You've been given X minutes to talk. If you use X+2 minutes, people tend to view it as if you've stolen those extra 2 minutes from them. This is arguably a fairly arrogant thing to do. Most of your audience members actually have other places they need to be and will be annoyed if you make them late or if they have to miss the closing due to your failure to manage time well. Do whatever you can to avoid going overtime!

# How to avoid going overtime

Rehearse extensively (figure out how to say more in less time)

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.

- If an answer can be made better/quicker with a visual, consider having a slide on hand that you can quickly jump to (put it with any extra slides at the end of the talk after your concluding slide) if someone asks that particular question.

Manage questions efficiently during the talk. Consider keeping notes of the time you should be at for the start of each slide (based on practice presentations). Start the stopwatch on your phone at the beginning of your talk, and monitor how well your timing is matching up with your notes. This will keep you on top of time management.

Have multiple 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 giving papers ask at the start “How much time do I have?” This is not good planning.
- Ask someone (preferably days ahead of your talk) exactly how much time you have and how questions will work.
  - If you have 90 minutes should you talk for 90 minutes? Should you talk for 80 minutes and leave 10 for questions at the end? Will people ask questions in the middle of the talk?
  - The culture on questions varies from situation to situation. Some seminars have people putting up their hands right from the first slide. Some prohibit questions during the introduction. Some tend to save questions for a question period of fixed length at the end. Ask the seminar/talk organizer ahead of time.

# Practice is crucial

There's no better way to get good at a talk than to practice giving it, over and over.

- Stand in front of a mirror
- Have friends listen to you give it, and have them interrupt with hard or annoying questions.

Don't expect that a good set of slides will automatically translate into a good talk

- Just like with writing, you will often have to agonize over exactly the right way to make a complicated point.
- You'll also want to think carefully about the right words to 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 5 minute version of the story that you could tell off-the-cuff.
- But if there's an effective 45 second version that requires some planning ahead of time, you'd be better off giving that one. By doing so you've just bought yourself a bunch of time that could be more usefully allocated to explaining a complex point, presenting some extra findings later in the talk, or engaging in a fruitful discussion.

Take everything you say in your first practice run and figure out how to say it more clearly and/or more efficiently.

If your department has brownbags, or other informal seminars, sign up regularly to present your ideas.

Present at conferences to get used to being in the spotlight.

# Practice is crucial

There's not much more obnoxious than assembling a group of people to listen to you, only to treat them to a lousy talk when you could have treated them to a good one.

- Consider the sum of implicit wages your audience is giving up to come listen to you. Each audience member could be making \$100/hour or more consulting, but they've chosen to listen to you instead. That's a serious signal of respect they're giving you. Be sure to return it by preparing yourself to give them a good talk.
- It's surprising how many big names in economics give bad talks. Sadly, they can get away with it...you can't!



# Suggestions specific to job talks

You'll likely have met several audience members over the course of your visit. It's nice if you remember their names and can call on them by name when they have questions.

Your opening words are an opportunity to briefly...

- note how much (and why) you've enjoyed your office visits prior to the talk
- note why you're excited to be interviewing with them...e.g.,
  - Active, collegial department
  - Exciting research being done.
  - People you can envision collaborating with.
- Avoid platitudes...don't just say "This department is awesome!"

Make sure to discuss your broader research agenda (and papers) briefly (3-5 minutes?) at the start and/or end of the talk, so people know you're not a one-hit-wonder.

# Suggestions specific to job talks

Most places will give you 30 minutes to prepare before your talk

- Make sure to study your visit schedule ahead of time, and ask your host questions about technology/venue/audience composition.
  - Do you need to use your own laptop? USB thumbdrive (A or C?)? Do you or they have the appropriate connectors? Who is supplying a clicker/laser pointer?
- Note that your office chats may run behind schedule so don't count on that prep time.

Make sure you get to the presentation venue 10-15 minutes ahead of time so that you can make sure the technology all works and start on time.

- You might need to nudge your host to make sure they get you to the venue in time for set up.
- Once everything's set up and ready to go you can calm your nerves by chatting with some of the people you met over the course of the day.

# To get better, get input and opinions from others

There's no one right way to present. Find what works for you.

Learn by watching others, having others watch you, and discussing ideas for good presentations with others.

Each time you attend a presentation, observe the speaker's delivery and think about what works and what doesn't. Discuss with others.

Over time, you'll find the style of presentation and the methods/tricks that work best for you.

- There's no one correct style of presentation
- But all good presentations will have the essentials of clarity, brevity, and audience engagement.

# Try to enjoy the experience!

Nerves are normal, but giving talks gets easier with practice (teaching also helps you get used to talking to a crowd)

If you think about it, it's pretty cool to have a room full of people who want to hear about your research. Very few people ever have that privilege.

Being on the job market is scary, but for many people there's no other time in their career when so many people will be interested in their research. Revel in it, at least a little bit!

Talks are key to getting your ideas out there. They're also a great way to get new ideas, improve your work, and make new connections with potential collaborators.

- Some of those connections may end up being journal referees for the paper you're presenting, future coauthors, or referees for your tenure/promotion case. Another reason to put your best foot forward!