

## **PhD Seminar**

### Hints for Giving Presentations

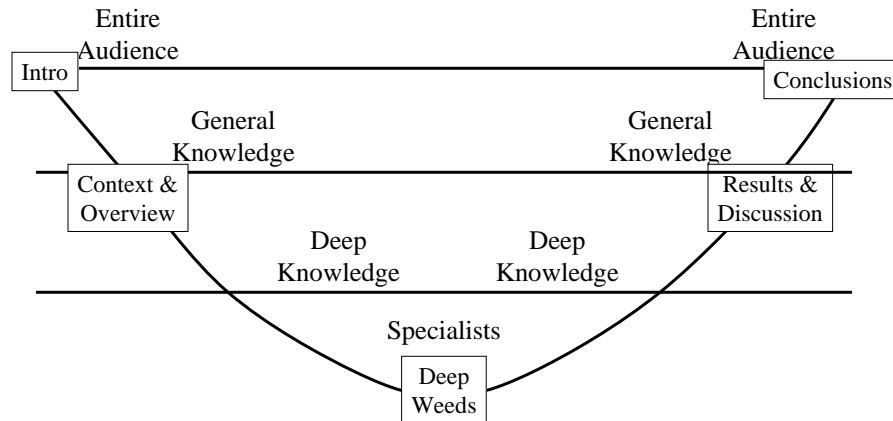
**Jeff Offutt**

<http://www.ise.gmu.edu/~offutt/>

## **Always Start a Talk With Something the Audience Already Knows**

A good talk will have an introduction that begins by restating something the audience already knows, then presents new material in increasing levels of difficulty, then closes by relating each level to the previous level, and concluding by relating the entire talk to something the audience knew ahead of time.

## Generic Outline – 4 Levels



## Presentations

### All Good Talks Tell a Story

- Introduce characters (rabbit, fox)
- Describe an important problem (fox wants to eat rabbit)
- Relate events that solve the problem (rabbit tells fox about thesis)
- A few examples (rabbit tells wolf, ... )
- Draw a general conclusion that is supported by your story (thesis doesn't matter, only advisor)

## Introduction

- Introduce characters: Motivate your work
  - Convey why the problem you are solving is interesting, important and exciting
  - Place your work in context: how is it different from what others have done
- Teaser for your results – why should we listen to the rest of the talk?
  - Don't need a full outline, but let audience know enough so they want to listen to the rest
  - Unlike rabbit story, suspense is not good

## Guts of the Talk

- Explain what you did
  - Don't be comprehensive – convey the big picture
  - Use pictures, 1-2 examples, etc.
- Convey one technical nugget
  - Show one neat concrete thing that came out of your work
- Analysis
  - Did your work solve the problem?
  - What are the important results of your work

## Conclusions

- Summarize your project with one or two key points
- If your audience remembers one thing from your talk, you have succeeded
- If they remember two things (and you covered two things), you're doing really well

## Some Specific Advice

- Average 2 minutes per slide
- Think carefully about the audience and what they know
- Use pictures
- Put at most five major bullets on your slides
- People should be able to read slides quickly – and then listen to you

## Can You Do All This in 20

### Minutes?

- Advertisers pay \$2.5M for 30 seconds during Superbowl – they must be pretty sure they can tell a compelling story in that time
- A *CSI* episode is 22 minutes long
- Make your points directly, avoid unnecessary details
- Organize your presentation
- Practice!
  - Without an audience
  - In front of your project group members
  - In front of friends not familiar with your project

## Dos and Don'ts for Presentations

**Many mistakes are common to  
researchers**

**Here are a few to avoid**

## Do Not Read Transparencies

- The audience can read them without your help
- Your job is to interpret what the concise phrases mean by supplying
  - Explanations
  - Examples
  - verbal descriptions
  - Perspective
  - etc
- Tell the audience a story about the slides

## Do Not Read Your Talk

- Use the transparencies as notes, but talk to the people
- Reading a paper or a speech is difficult
  - if it is not done well, it will be a catastrophe
- If you are reading too much, remove some words from your slides
  - that will force you to talk

## **Point at the Screen, Not the Projector**



- A huge tube flying in front of the text is very distracting
- Even worse is pointing at a PC ... the audience cannot even see it!
- Most people do not handle light pens well
  - it takes a lot of experience to use them without distracting the audience
  - Nerves make your hand shake
- Pencils and pens are too short to be effective
  - they force you to stand in front of the screen

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

13

## **Anticipate the Questions**



- While rehearsing, think of the ten most difficult and embarrassing questions you may be asked and prepare the answers
  - most of the actual questions won't be nearly as tough as these
- If you get a question you had not anticipated, that means you did not prepare adequately

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

14

## Keep Slide Animation Simple

- Lots of jumping, whirling, and flying looks cool ... to teenagers
- But it usually looks childish in a scientific talk
- Use animation to improve the message of the talk
  - for example, to advance a concept one step at a time

## Use Color Cautiously

- The key is to use high contrast, low contrast is very hard to read
- Remember that color will look different on different computers, and different when projected
- Cognitive scientists claim
  - dark text on light background is faster to read in print
  - light on dark is faster to read when projected
- Blue text is especially fuzzy

## Answer Questions Clearly



- Repeat the question:
  - you can make sure you understood it
  - to give you time to think
  - to make sure the audience heard it
- Listen attentively and answer clearly even if the question was stupid
- Never ever **ever** get defensive
- Don't judge the questions; senior scientists don't need PhD students to tell them that they asked a "good question"

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

17

## Learn From Other Speakers



- Pay attention to the delivery styles of both good and bad speakers
- When a talk is boring or over your head – think about the delivery
- Pay attention to characteristics of the room:
  - Does the sound carry well?
  - How is the lighting?

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

18

## Stay in Control

- You can decide whether to answer questions at the beginning or end of the talk
- Allowing questions in the middle is dangerous because you might lose control
  - some people will try to disrupt interview talks to see how you handle it.
- Don't let a "question" turn into a talk
- Remember, 90% of the audience wants you to tell the interrupting questioner to "just shut up"
  - Interrupt the questioner (politely)

## Transparencies Must Be in Order

- Number the transparencies (both plastic and electronic)
  - They will stay in order
  - Audience can follow more easily
  - Audience can ask questions more easily
- After giving a talk, put the slides back in order (for plastic slides)
  - 5 minutes now saves 3 hours later

## Pick Out People

- Do not stare at the session chair, teacher, or screen
- Pick out six to nine faces, equally distributed throughout the audience
- Speak to each and make eye contact
- Always look at some person when making an important point or conclusion
- You are talking to only one person at a time, and each person feels that you have been talking to him or her personally
- Lack of eye contact suggests evasiveness or lying

## Speak Clearly and Assertively

- Do not use words that you do not understand
- Do not allow your voice to drop when you are dealing with controversial ideas
- Be assertive when you answer a question with “I don’t know.”
  - Make the audience think it’s okay that you don’t know
  - The audience will respect your honesty
  - The questioner probably knows you don’t know already

## Don't Worry About Pronunciation



- If English is not your native language, try to get the pronunciation right, but don't agonize over it
  - Remember: Everybody has an accent!
  - You need to be understandable, not perfect
- If possible, rehearse with colleagues whose native language is English

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

23

## Keep Them With You



- Slides
  - Keep your transparencies and notes with you
  - You can practice on the plane
  - Most importantly, if you lose your transparencies, your talk will be a disaster
- PPT projection
  - Keep a spare copy on a ~~diskette~~ data stick
  - Take the spare to the room
  - Check that your slides are on the PC before the session starts

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

24

## Don't Fidget

- Try to stand fairly still and look comfortable
- Don't repeatedly check your watch, laugh nervously, wring your hands, or rock
- If your nerves show too much, the audience will start to think you're afraid that they'll find the flaws in your research
  - and start looking harder !!

## The Room and Nerves

- If you feel that the room is yours and the audience is visiting you, you will feel less nervous
- If at a conference, sit in on a talk in the room before your talk
- Always visit the room before the audience
  - Correct any problems
  - Adjust the lighting, furniture, etc.

## Stimulants and Physical Comfort



- If you have a tendency to be nervous, your adrenaline level is high and the last thing you need is coffee
  - Don't drink it just to be polite
- Make sure to visit the toilet before your talk
- Be comfortable
  - Tight ties and high heels break your concentration
  - Shorts and Hawaiian shirts break your audience's concentration

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

27

## Avoid Humor Unless You're Very



### Good at it

- Humor backfires more often than it works
- Starting a technical talk with a joke doesn't work for most speakers
- Humor has its place and is appreciated if done well, but it takes a lot of practice and experience to do it right
  - And never works if you're nervous
- Making yourself the butt of the joke is always safest; making anyone else the butt of a joke is very risky

© Jeff Offutt, 2005-2007

28

## Use a Timer

- Looking at your watch breaks the audience's concentration
- Use a traveling clock or put your watch on the table
- If you have rehearsed sufficiently, you will not need a clock!

## Be Yourself

- The most important thing you can do is to be yourself
- These hints and notes are not intended to rework your personality for one talk
- You are speaking because you have something important to say and the people in your audience are there to hear you say it
- It is best said simply and casually

## Most Importantly

- Have fun – if you have fun your audience will
- Remember this is a show – the technical aspect is important, but every talk is part theatre
- Preparation solves every problem
- Nerves never stop – even the most experienced speakers get nervous
  - You can't stop being nervous, you have to control it