

Some tips on early-stage presentations

The most important thing to remember about an early-stage presentation is that your main goal is to get feedback on your work from others. This is different from an academic seminar – which you will give later – whose main goal is to showcase your work. Below are some practical tips that can help you achieve that goal.

Before the talk/preparing for the talk

1. **Decide what feedback you want.** What questions would you like answers to?
2. **Think about what to include.** Each additional slide or graph carries an additional cost on your audience, so anything you include should contribute something to the talk. Ask yourself “why do I need to include this?” and “what would happen to the talk if I just cut this slide?”. You can also include extra slides in the appendix so you can quickly reach them during the talk if you need to.
3. **Don’t be afraid of repetition:** Longer presentations strictly follow the sequence of (i) say what you’re going to say, (ii) say what you’re saying, (iii) say what you just said. In an early stage talk, you may not have time to do all three, but you should still do (i) (and, obviously, (ii)). If you can, summarize your progress in a concise way at the end. You can always skip that slide if you are out of time. Another good way to replace (iii) is to end with an outline for what you are going to do next.
4. **Practice.** If you don’t practice the presentation you will not know if you have too much (or, occasionally, too little) material. You should have no more than 20 minutes of material for a 30 min talk. Ideally, you’d have about 15. Questions will take up the rest of the time.
5. However, **don’t memorize the talk.** If you memorize your talk, you risk getting thrown off your rhythm when people ask questions. Instead, learn (and maybe write down) the bullet-point version of your talk. Bullet points are easier to remember, and you will not feel like you are bound to follow an exact script.

During the talk

1. **Say what you want feedback on.** Be direct. You should do this at the beginning of the talk.
2. **Skip the literature review.** Your focus should be on your work, not the work of others.
3. **Get to the point right away.** You should introduce your research question in your first slide. If you have not presented before, you can give some motivation, otherwise, it’s perfectly acceptable to have your research question be the first bullet point.

4. **Keep the introduction short.** You'll likely want feedback on the how, not the what. So introduce your question and setting quickly, then move on to whatever it is you want feedback on (model, empirics, etc.)
5. **Invite comments.** Related to 1. If you are not getting the feedback you wanted, ask for it explicitly (I am stuck here, what could I do better? Which alternative approach should I take to this issue?, etc.).
6. **Manage your time.** If you are getting a lot of questions early on, have a plan to skip some slides and make sure the audience has a chance to see and react to the aspects of your work you would like feedback on.
7. **Answer ALL questions.** When questions arise, try your hardest to answer them to the best of your ability. If you don't know, say that you don't know. If you haven't thought of that question before, explain that your answer is off the top of your head. If a question is not taking you in the direction that you have in mind for the talk, politely offer to discuss it with the person who asked after the talk (that's an answer too!).

After the talk

1. **Be open to large scale change.** Getting feedback means being open to making changes, doing things differently. This sometimes may involve throwing out something you have worked on for weeks (which might strike you as wasteful – but remember, sunk costs!). The goal is to do things better in the end, even if it involves more work.

Bonus: practical tips

- Budget about 2 minutes per slide for early-stage talks, and about 90sec per slide for more advanced talks
 - (why the difference? in early-stage talks you will get a lot of questions that are unrelated to what you actually want to talk about. Later on, you will learn how to prevent those questions by explaining more carefully what you are doing. You will also slowly build up the confidence to say: “That’s not a direction I’m currently planning to explore, but it sounds interesting: let’s talk about it after the talk”).
- Bullet points should not go over a single line
- You need to talk about every single thing you put on a slide
 - This is particularly important for tables. Do NOT put up giant tables with a bunch of coefficients unless you are prepared to discuss all of them.
- Do not use field-specific jargon unless (1) absolutely necessary, or (2) you are giving a field-specific talk

- whenever you use jargon, define it in advance
- Use informative slide titles
 - ~~Preliminary analysis~~ → We find that X increases Y
 - ~~Data~~ → We use data on X from source Y
 - ~~Model~~ → Single-agent model of physician choice
- Numbers are better than words
- Pictures are better than numbers
- Don't be afraid to use colors or other ways of highlighting specific content on the page
 - BUT: be consistent with the colors you use, your slides are not the rainbow

If you have a chance, take a look at the presentations that you know are good. Most TED talks are good examples of people who are really good at public speaking giving a brief overview of their craft. Check how many words their slides contain. Very few, if any at all. Why is that? Because when you give a presentation you are already talking. So why would you need to put words behind you, repeating what you're already saying? Instead, good public speeches include slides to convey information that words cannot convey. This is why as many of your slides as possible should be images and graphs.

(So why use words at all? Because you will likely encounter audiences that are not as interested in your talk as the audience of a Ted Talk. Your talks will be more than an hour long. When they are shorter, they will come in a sequence of a bunch of different talks. The audience **will** get distracted. So use words on your slide to convey the basic intuition of what you're doing, so that if someone gets distracted they can easily jump back in by glancing at your slides.)