

How to Prepare and Give a Talk

Much of the material was adapted from the following paper:

"How to give a good research talk", Simon L Peyton Jones, John Hughes, John Launchbury, Department of Computing Science, University of Glasgow, Scotland.

1. Preliminaries

- In this class, every student needs to present two or more research papers.
- Your presentation should be 20 minutes long, given to a group of people who are motivated and intelligent, but who may not know much about the particular area you are presenting.
- Allow about 10 minutes for Q&A. Questions can be asked throughout the talk.

2. General Guidelines

- You should usually see your talk primarily as a teaser for further study, rather than as an in-depth treatment.
- Ask yourself this question: If someone remembers only one thing from my talk, what would I like it to be?. Do not forget to tell the audience the answer to this question.
- Many talks are far too abstract. They present slide upon slide of impressive-looking squiggles, but leave the audience none the wiser. It is utterly vital to present examples which demonstrate the points you are trying to make.
- The need to motivate and illustrate your talk with examples is the most important single point in this paper, because so many talks fail to do so. Ask yourself again and again: "Have I illustrated this idea/technique/algorithm with an example?".
- The tension is this: you need to say enough to convey the essential content of your talk, but you must not overwhelm your audience with too much material. The best way out of this dilemma is to adopt a non-uniform approach to your talk; that is, treat some aspects in more detail than others. It may be painful not to talk about the other parts, but it is better than only giving a superficial treatment to everything, or over-running your time.
- Some overall introduction/motivation to the paper is essential. But do avoid the temptation of spending five or ten minutes on rambling introductory remarks. Instead, jump straight in with an example which demonstrates the problem you are addressing. Remember: if you bore your audience in the first few minutes you may never get them back.

3. Visual Aides

- Use PowerPoint slides. If you do not have access to PowerPoint you may use .html pages and show them using Netscape.
- Use a dark background (e.g., blue) and light font color (e.g., white). It is easier on the eyes.
- When writing slides remember that people can read and take in only very little information. Six or seven "things" on one slide is quite enough.
- You should plan to talk ABOUT what's on your slides, not read them.
- About a half way through, it can be quite helpful to draw breath with a slide which says "This is what I have discussed so far, and now I'm going on to cover these

areas", or some such. This can help to re-orient your audience, and make it clear that this is the moment to ask questions if they are lost already.

4. Giving the Talk

- If you don't feel nervous especially to a large or unfamiliar audience, you are a most unusual person.
- Some people hide most of their slide using some PowerPoint magic, revealing it line by line as they go through it. This is a very irritating habit. It is also rather condescending ("You can't be trusted to listen to me if I show you the next line too").
- Don't over-run. It is selfish and rude. Either you will be cut off by the teacher before you have reached your punch line, or you will compress others' talks, or you will make everyone late. In any case, your audience's attention span is limited, so you probably won't manage to convey much in your over-time period.
- As you get more experienced, you will learn how long a single slide lasts in your talks. The average for most people is probably 2 to 3 minutes.
- Plan a couple of places where you can leave out a bunch of slides, and check your watch when you get to them. It's a good idea to have a couple of slides at the end of your talk which you can use in the unlikely event that you finish early, but which you usually expect not to use.