

Presentation Advice

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This is a quick guide that should help you understand how to present your material in the international colloquium and workshop – though the basic principles. Most of the text below is from a document that Francesco Caselli prepared at the LSE, but I have made a few additions/subtractions.

1) Research Question

The first thing you need to be able to do is to state clearly and concisely your research question. If you cannot state this question in one to two sentences, you will be in trouble from the start of your presentation. Every paper is the answer to a question. Your first task in the presentation is to make sure that everyone in the audience is absolutely clear about what that question is. You need to achieve this within the first 5 minutes of the talk – in most cases much earlier than that. The question must appear in your slides, i.e. your slides must feature one (and ideally only one) sentence ending in the punctuation mark “?”. Ideally this question will appear in your first slide.

Occasionally, you will need to give some (very brief!) background before you can get to the question, particularly if your question is about explaining a fact, and you need the audience to first know that fact. In these cases, the question may have to appear in the second slide. Under no circumstances should your question appear after the second slide.

2) Motivation

Your next slide should explain why the question you asked is important. Normally, the answer is some combination of: (i) we need to understand some hitherto unexplained economic phenomenon that matters to a significant number of people; (ii) The answer to the question could have significant policy implications; (iii) a certain fact is inconsistent with existing theories so the paper solves a puzzle. You should not need more than one slide for the motivation. If you do it is a bad sign.

Ed Leamer and Jim Levinsohn famously wrote that an ideal paper involves “theory, data, and issues”. Many of us have had successful careers writing papers that just incorporate two of these items. Beware if you only have one. Good research questions typically have interesting answers whatever you find. Try to avoid asking questions that everyone thinks they know the answer to (“Do tariffs raise import prices?”) because it will be very hard to motivate the paper if you confirm the conventional wisdom.

3) Your Answer (Contribution)

Here you need to invoke the “KISS” principle: Keep it Simple, Stupid”. The point is not to confuse people with all of the nuances of the answer revealed in every robustness check of every specification. You should state a one or two sentence answer to your question. A seminar is not a detective story, where you keep the audience in suspense until the end. On the contrary, you need to convey very early and very clearly what is your answer to the question you posed at the beginning. Again, this should be contained in one slide and one slide only.

If you are at the early stages of your project, you may not be able to have an answer to the question you posed. That’s okay. If you are in the early stages and don’t have results, just say so.

4) Intuition/strategy

For theoretical/computational papers, this is the slide where you informally convey the basic intuition for the result that you have announced on the previous slide. For empirical papers this is the slide where you give a sense of what empirical regularities people have missed and/or the identification strategy. Again, no more than one slide on this. In fact the answer and the intuition/strategy can often share the same slide.

5) Literature

The function of the literature survey is to answer one question in the audience's mind: "Hasn't someone answered this question before?" Do not spend time talking about similarities with prior work, you want to explain the differences. This should not be a long list of papers and names that are somewhat related to your work. The point is to tell the audience about (i) what are the existing answers in the literature to the question the paper addresses; and (ii) why you are not (fully) convinced by the existing answers. One slide (at most).

Slide Structure

Think about your titles. They should give a quick answer to what the takeaway of the slide is. For example your first five slides might have titles like "Question", "Motivation", "Intuition", etc. It's also okay to actually state the question in the slide title if it fits.

Every time you present a slide you should think about why you are showing the slide and that should be stated somewhere on the slide. It is waste of space to have a title like "Table 3". Instead, have a title states the key result in the table. Similarly, for theoretical results use the titles to remind the audience why you are showing the equations/graphs and what they should be learning from it.

Your first few slides (discussed above) should use words only (and sometimes graphs). Use words very sparingly. If you fill a slide with words you are either saying "don't listen to me, read the slide" or "don't read the slide, listen to me". Slides and talk should be complements, not substitutes.

Body of the Talk

The rest of the talk is where you get into the meat of the paper. Here are some guidelines for this part.

- (i) List all your assumptions clearly and explicitly, and be prepared to explain why are they reasonable, and what role do they play in delivering your results.
- (ii) Skip most of the derivations. Your audience won't possibly be able to follow all the derivations in detail and you don't have time for them anyway. The only exception is when a particular step in the derivation delivers useful intuition/insight in what is driving the results.
- (iii) In presenting your results, explain the notation carefully and use equations very sparingly. Once again, the criterion for including an equation is that it helps you talk the audience through the key insight/mechanism of the paper. If an equation does not generate additional insight, don't include it.
- (iv) Don't fill your slides with equations. For a 60-minute presentation, do your utmost to stay below 15 equations. A good rule of thumb is that if you don't plan to carefully talk through an equation, you probably shouldn't show it. When presenting equations, you should try as

much as possible to repeat (verbally) what each variable stands for. People often get lost in the notation, and reminders help.

- (v) Overall number of slides. Approximately 99% of presenters show up with far too many slides (and far too many equations). Then they are forced to rush through the second half of the presentation, and make choices on the fly on what to cut out. The result is chaos, bad choices, and a confused audience. It is far better to have thought carefully about what is essential, and what is not, in advance, and prepare the slides accordingly. My golden rule would be 20 slides for a 60-minute presentation.

Conclusion

This should be one slide that restates the answer to your question and reminds the audience why you found what you did.