

## **Independent Project Presentation Guidelines**

### **Imaging the Body, W06**

In your next project group meeting with the faculty, you will give a practice run of your presentation. To prepare for this and your final presentation, please read through the guidelines and helpful hints below.

#### ***Be overly organized***

Remember that you are teaching the rest of us about your topic. You are the expert, and as such, need to carefully consider what you will present and how to best present it. Begin by outlining your topic and deciding what are the most important points. It is more important to get across a few points that will be remembered than to tell everything you know about a subject. A well conceived talk, carefully tailored to fit audience interest, can still fail if it is difficult to follow. There is a distinct and important difference between written and oral presentations. A confused reader can regress as needed to wade through an obscure passage; a confused listener is likely to be lost forever.

A talk must be carefully organized so that the information flows in a totally logical pattern. In the first few minutes, establish a clear framework and context for the rest of your presentation. Avoid the unnecessary use of jargon and specialized words whenever possible. It might make you feel educated, but will lose your audience. There are very few technical terms that can't be explained in simple English. If you must use jargon, define it the first time you use it.

For example, if your topic is how syphilis affects brain anatomy and function, beginning with a brief history of the disease from its origin to some current numbers of its prevalence and then briefly outlining where your research led you will create a framework that you will then fill in during your talk. This framework helps the audience, many of whom may have never even thought about your topic, understand how the detailed information you will present fits into a larger context—one that they can relate to. Define all the unavoidable technical terms during this introduction.

There should be no gaps, short circuits, or unnecessary convolutions. When an audience stumbles in making a mental leap, it is the speaker who falls flat. The best structured talks are those where the audience correctly and continuously anticipates what is coming next. It is well to indicate early in your exposition just where you expect to go. There is merit in the old Army training dictum “Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, tell 'em, then tell 'em what you told 'em.” Surprise endings may be dramatic, but they are rarely useful in a research presentation.

#### ***Use simple visual aids***

Complex and detailed charts and diagrams are rarely useful during a talk. KISS—Keep It Simple, Speaker. Your audience should be able to glean the important points from a visual quickly. Use large diagrams and text that are easy to read from the back of the class. Visuals are an excellent way to help establish your framework by giving the audience a physical reference for your topic. In the syphilis example, a schematic of the brain and one of the skin might be useful references throughout your talk.

**Use low-tech visuals.** All presentations will occur in E4115. Use large sheets of newsprint or other low-tech approaches that can be quickly displayed to minimize technical difficulties during presentation days.

## **Delivery**

Of the three elements of a research presentation (Content, Organization, Delivery), delivery is probably least important. A well conceived, logically organized paper will to some degree survive the dullest presentation, whereas the most articulate delivery cannot salvage a talk that misses audience interest or one that cannot be followed. This is not meant to imply that delivery can be neglected; a poorly delivered talk is unlikely to be well received. Even though delivery is, to a degree, frosting on the cake, it can, like frosting, get attention and make the whole thing more palatable.

Reading a paper from a prepared text may be the easiest way to deliver it for many people — but it almost certainly is the most difficult way of delivering it well. Papers are most often read because of insecurity — the speaker is afraid of losing their place, omitting some important point, or is simply nervous speaking in public. All of these concerns are generally invalid. No speaker with good notes will get significantly lost during their talk. Really Important Points are rarely forgotten by a well-prepared speaker during a presentation, and those that are will either be raised during the discussion following the talk or never missed. Perhaps the best thing that could happen to readers of talks is for a vagrant breeze to carry their text out the window seconds before they ascend the podium. After the initial panic subsides, nearly all would sail through their talk with little difficulty. Their presentation would likely be far more effective, and they would recognize a written text for the crutch it is.

How does one deliver a paper without reading it? Basically, by thoroughly knowing the subject. All of us can clearly explain our research informally to a small group of friendly colleagues. The same style of exposition works nicely before a larger audience.

## **Prepare thoroughly and practice your talk**

Preparation consists of two parts: composing the talk and rehearsal. The first part is probably the more important, but it is also easier to slight. The skillful speaker begins planning well in advance of the presentation. The level of audience interest and background is assessed, and the content of the talk accordingly determined. The talk is ordered into a sequence of flowing logic. Visual aids are conceived to convey their message quickly and directly and knit tightly into the fabric of the text. If all these things are done well, the speaker is almost assured of some success.

Rehearsal is both valuable and necessary. It is valuable in that it allows the speaker to develop a smooth delivery by incorporating key words and phrases; valuable because it offers a means of checking content and organization before a group of friends prior to the presentation. It is necessary because it is almost the only way to establish timing. Even if the paper is (God forbid!) read, rehearsal is vital to staying within the time frame. Speakers who, preferring an informal delivery, eschew rehearsal are the ones most likely to get caught in the “Migawd! It’s- the-two-minute-warning-and-I’m-only-halfway-through” panic. Observing a speaker thus trapped can be entertaining, but it doesn’t do much for the communication of scientific information. It does not pay, however, to attempt to memorize a paper word for word. A paper obviously presented by rote sounds stilted and unnatural and is as distracting as one that is read.

## **References**

This handout relied heavily on direct quotes (not indicated) and paraphrasing from:

Clifton, H. E. No date. *Tips on Talks or How to Keep an Audience Attentive, Alert and Around for the Conclusions at a Scientific Meeting*. U.S. Geological Survey, 345 Middlefield Rd., Menlo Park, CA 94025.