

ESCMID Summer School

Guidance for Student Presentations

Background

All of the attendees will have the opportunity to improve their scientific presentation skills in a non-threatening environment. Some of you will give a short presentation to the entire Summer School, while the others will give their presentations to a small group in one of the afternoon tutorials. Regardless which of these audiences you will have, each student will prepare a 10-minute presentation. A 10-minute time period is traditionally allocated to scientific presentations at a congress. It is more difficult to prepare than a half-hour or one-hour talk because every word has to count! This will be even more of a challenge for you if your first language is not English. But, we are here to help you. In contrast with many talks you will give in the future, you will have the opportunity to get constructive feedback, so that you can improve your presentation skills.

Presentation skills are important and speaking in front of scientific groups is something you will do many times in your career. Learning how to prepare and deliver the talk is as important as the content. Here are some suggestions on how to prepare your presentation.

What to do

The subject. Select an interesting subject. This might be a difficult or unusual case you have handled, some interesting organism isolated or an epidemiological or clinical observation. The subject does not have to be a rare case. It does not matter if the audience knows something of what you are talking about. Problems that all of us frequently face are often more interesting than esoteric problems, because there may be little useful discussion about a rare case. The case should illustrate something interesting which has caught your eye in clinical practice. However, the subject does not have to be entirely clinical, e.g. one might perform a review of blood culture isolates. The presentation would preferably then be supported by a piece of literature which you have looked up or even a study or audit (“that’s strange, I wonder how often that happens?”) which you did in response to the observation.

The message. Decide what message you want people to understand and remember at the end of the presentation. It is best to aim for one strong message and not to dilute this with multiple messages or themes.

Preparing the slides. Plan to talk for 8-10 minutes. Use an absolute maximum of 15 PowerPoint-type slides, but perhaps aim for 8-10. As a general rule, plan on one slide per minute.

The appearance of the slides is important and "less is often more." Do not be tempted to be too clever with the technology, as this can detract from your scientific message; do not place too much material on each slide. As a general rule, there should be no more than 8 lines of text on a slide, preferably no more than 6. The golden rule is 6 by 6 (maximum 6 lines with 6 words each). Choosing a font size that is legible is vital. Footnotes, such as for references, can be 20pt but the smallest font in the main body of the slide should be 24pt.

Do not put the full text on the slide. That is, you are not going to read the slide to the audience. Put wording that captures the essence of what you are going to say. Actually, slides have two purposes. One is for the audience, to reinforce visually what you are saying. The second is to help you, the speaker, organize your thoughts and guide you as you speak. The wording is meant to cue you, to remind you, of what to say.

Pictures, illustrations, charts, etc. are very useful. The phrase "A picture is worth a thousand words" is old, but true. If you use illustrations, however, they must not be complicated and they must be easily visible. Don't forget to explain illustrations to the audience during your talk.

Take extra care to remove mistakes from your slides. The smallest spelling mistake will be noticed, it will distract your audience from your message, and it will make them think that you did not care to prepare for your presentation. So, avoid misspellings. The capitalization should be consistent, e.g. if you use bullets, the first letter should either always be capitalized, or never capitalized. Indentations and style of bullets should be consistent. Headings should be consistent, e.g. the same colour, the same capitalization style.

What colour scheme to use? Believe it or not, black letters on a white background is the most legible format. But, many of us prefer to bring in a bit of colour. Whatever you use, do not use a background that is so fancy that it detracts from your messages. Use a background that contrasts well with the letters and numbers you will use. Be aware that just because something looks legible to you as you sit 30 cm from your computer screen does not mean it will be legible to an audience when projected on a screen. Try to read your slides from the opposite corner of the room, with your eyes half closed. A common colour mistake is red letters on a dark blue background. You should also avoid using green and red as contrasting colours (about 10% of men are red-green colour blind) and yellow or orange letters on a white background are almost invisible if the presentation is not held in a completely dark room (and if so the audience dozes off).

One tip. You may give many talks in your career, so choose a background early in your career and then consistently use it. It makes swapping slides from one presentation to another easy.

And always remember: "Less is more."

Content. Content generally includes:

- a title slide
- (possibly) very short background information
- the content of the presentation
- discussion: a short comment on the interesting features of the case. You may include relevant literature to bring out one or two points. Reference any material you use with footnotes at the bottom of the slide, as audiences like to know where you obtained your data. Footnotes should include enough information to allow the reader to find the reference, e.g. "Hawkes S et al. Lancet 2003;189:425-9" but you do not want to use too many words because this simply takes up precious space on the slide.
- a concluding slide, highlighting the conclusions of your presentation.

The presentation. You will present your case to the entire Summer School, or, within your group in one of the tutorial sessions in the afternoon. In either case, there will be still some time for discussion of the content and the presentation style, where you can collect valuable information to improve your presentation skills. You and your classmates are not competing with one another; we are all here to help each other learn.

Every person develops their own presentation style. How do you do this? Some of it will come from you, your personality, your experience and comfort in front of an audience, etc. Everyone can be a good speaker! It is simply a matter of taking the job seriously and spending time. Watch the presentation style of other speakers and decide what you like, what is effective, how they make and use their slides. Borrow those features that work and that suit you, and incorporate them into your presentation style.

How rapidly to speak? English is the second or third language for most participants in this course and for most attendees at international meetings. They may be fluent but many are not. Speak slowly and distinctly.

The key to getting your talk as good as it can be is to practice. Practice at home. Practice in front of your peers (which is much more difficult than in front of a bunch of people that you do not know!). Practice again and again; rehearse what you are going to say in your mind. You can use the Comment feature of PowerPoint to put in the comments that you will make. Remember your opening lines exactly. Your maximal nervousness is at the beginning and your mind may go blank. Similarly rehearse your last sentences exactly and do not drift into the sunset.....

Time your presentation so that you do not take more time than you are given. For our Summer School, everyone should talk for 8-10 minutes followed by 10 minutes of discussion.

Are people who present talks nervous? Most of us are. When George Jones, a famous American country and western music singer, was about 60 years old and about to give probably his 2,000th performance, a reporter asked him if he still got nervous in front of an audience. He replied: "Yes. And, the performer who isn't will not give a good performance." If we care about the job we will do, we will be nervous. But, fortunately, even though we may feel terrified, only rarely are we so nervous that the audience recognizes it.

Good luck: after all it should be fun!