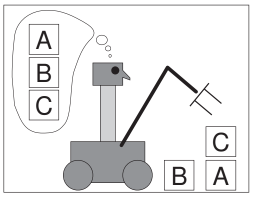

CS640 Fall 99

Research Memo 5: Verbally Presenting Your Work

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Conferences generally provide 15-20 minutes for a talk. To some this seems like an eternity, but most people find it difficult to fit their work within that period. The key to a successful talk is good preparation and a good attitude while you're speaking. In this memo, I'll describe some suggestions for how to organize your work to fit in the allotted time and for what to do and not to do while you are presenting.

1 Organization

Most of my talks follow the same basic organization; each of the parts is described in terms of what goes on the slides and what you should be saying. This organization assumes a completed project, or at least one far enough along to have results. However, the organization can be modified to match a proposal presentation.

1. Introduction [2 minutes]

   slide title, authors, affiliation, acknowledgments

   speech start with a sentence that draws in the audience. A joke is great if it is your style and it is related to the talk. A quote or whatever you consider to be the most important contribution of your work is also good. The first few minutes sets the tone and can determine whether you hold the audience or not.

2. The Problem [2 minutes]

   slides graphics or text that either summarizes or exemplifies your work

   speech describe briefly what problem your work addresses, why it is important and what characteristics about it are most critical

3. Background [2 minutes]

   slides bullet list of who's done what or what has been done before that's related.

   speech discuss the high points of each one, while maintaining a focus on what is important for understanding *your* work.

4. Detailed description of your work [5 minutes]

   slides may include architecture diagrams, algorithms, examples, output

speech describe what you did and what's important about it. You may switch between detailed and high level descriptions as appropriate to make your point. Where appropriate, describe false starts that didn't pan out.

5. Evaluation [5 minutes]

   slides one slide per major experiment/hypothesis, give general sketch of experiment and summarize results

   speech emphasize the goal of the experiment and what you learned. Back up your points with the data.

6. Future Work [2 minutes]

   slide summarize current status, list what is left to do

   speech say what you think is most important in following up on this work, point out tough problems remaining.

7. Conclusion [2 minutes]

   slide list the major lessons learned and contributions from your work

   speech always end with what you think was most important. That's what people will remember from the talk.

The times are approximate. Some talks will emphasize one part and have little to say about another (e.g., pure studies may not include the detailed description part). For your proposal presentation, you will substitute "what I will be doing" parts for the "what you've done" parts. The evaluation section will briefly cover what you propose to do; you'll have no future work or conclusion sections, which reduces the overall time to about 15 minutes.

2 Suggestions for Successful Technical Speaking

- Don't think you must describe everything you've done. A talk is usually an advertisement for the written exposition of your work. Focus on the most important attributes of your work. At the end, the audience should know enough of what you have done to see how it fits into the field, to be able to summarize it and to appreciate your contribution.

- Don't read the slide. You waste time that could have better been used otherwise and it tends to annoy the audience who by and large can read.

- Remember how memory works: primacy and recency. Your audience will best remember what you said in the beginning and at the end of your talk.

- Keep overlays to a minimum. They are awkward to use and most people spend too much time trying to get them aligned.

- Use technology appropriately. Color can be invaluable, especially for displaying complex data, but it can also be distracting.

- Speak in clear, measured tones. Don't speed up and slow down as panic about timing kicks in.

- Place a time piece (watch or timer) where you can see it. Be aware of the time.
- Test run your talk with an audience, if possible. The more important the talk is the more you should practice it. (I can't tell you how many times I practiced my job talk.)
- Don't read from your notes. You should know what you want to say.
- Know your audience. Be prepared to define terms that may be unfamiliar. Don't waste time explaining concepts they should know.
- Do not deprecate your work; if you say it is worthless, why should anyone listen to you. State its benefits and limitations dispassionately.
- Be animated. The worst talk is one in which the speaker seems disinterested.
- Have a theme or bottom line point in mind and orient what you say towards it. If the audience expects you to prove/demonstrate something in your talk, they'll know how to assimilate what you say.
- Use presentation software to generate your talk. These packages use large fonts that are easy to see. They gently force you not to put too much on each slide.
- Make eye contact with your audience.
- Be polite when handling questions, and try not to get flustered. If someone catches you off guard, say so, e.g., "I never thought of that.", "Thank you for pointing it out to me.", "Can you suggest some references?" Someone once tried to goad me into an argument by asking why anyone should care because I had presented results for a single system; my response was to admit this as a problem and to explain why I thought the example was representative of other problems that he was interested in. Remember you are the one in control; keep it.