

# How to give a good presentation when presentations are not your thing

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If you're like me, you didn't pursue your studies out of a love for public speaking, yet you may find that presenting your work is a vital part of doing science. For a researcher's findings to have impact, they must be shared with and communicated to others, preferably in a way that is easy to understand, interesting, and memorable. When it comes to giving presentations, we all know the basics of what *not* to do: Don't cram too much information into your slides, don't ignore your audience, don't read off your slides. On the other hand, it's not always clear what makes a good presentation good.

I recently presented my research findings at the 2021 North European Young Diabetologists (NEYD) Annual Meeting. This meeting involved young researchers presenting their research to peers and world-renowned senior discussants. For me, this was the first presentation I had given during my PhD program and came after a long period of having little opportunity to practice my (non-Zoom) people skills, thanks to COVID-19. Despite hours of preparation, I was incredibly nervous and walked back to my seat after the presentation thinking that I had totally bombed. I later learnt that I had been selected to give my presentation to an international audience on the second day of the event. Here's what I learnt, from both my own experience of presenting and watching my peers:

- **Rehearse in front of an audience:** Reading your speaker notes aloud as you sit in front of your computer is not the same as having to face a real-life audience and keep them interested in your topic. I found it useful to practice with someone that I knew would give me honest (read: brutal) feedback, followed by someone that I was less familiar with to get some exposure to facing an unfamiliar audience.
- **Reframe the goal of the presentation:** Many students and early-career researchers feel nervous about presentations and perceive that there is a lot at stake. I found that I was able to tackle my nerves by actively reframing the aim of the presentation by focusing on what I could *gain* from the situation: "This could be an exciting scientific discussion" or "This is a useful practice for my PhD defence".
- **Start and finish powerfully:** Many begin with the classic, "Hi. My name is X. Today, I'm going to present Y". Instead, you could start with a story that captures

the audience's attention. Even though research is often concerned with highly specialized and technical topics, I'm sure you can think of a way to connect yours to something relatable that occurs in everyday life. Similarly, you don't want to give a killer presentation and then finish with "Well, that's it..." or "I'll just stop there". At the very least, you could finish by stating that you look forward to hearing comments and/or taking questions. You could even invite discussion relating to a specific point from the presentation or have some questions prepared for your audience.

- **Fake it 'til you make it!** I found that I could use my body to trick my mind into thinking that I felt confident. I stood tall with my feet firmly on the ground. I forced out a strong voice and spoke through the jitters. Remember that, after an obligatory 1–2 minutes of nervousness, you *will* be fine. Giving a presentation is like performing, but you must do more than just read your lines. Use hand gestures to indicate the significance of your research findings. Consider that it is an opportunity to show some of your personality too. If you are boasting about a certain finding, tell the audience that you are boasting about it!
- **Seek out a friendly face:** I noticed that my nerves edged away when I looked around the room and found that there were a few people smiling at me. These were the same people that I had met and chatted with directly before the event. My suggestion is to arrive at the venue early and do some pre-networking, so that those people may become a reference point for you during the presentation.
- **Genuinely interact with your audience:** We all know that we need to engage our audience, but how

can we go about it? Questions such as, “Can I get a show of hands who has heard of [insert topic]?” can fall flat if there is no follow-up. If you ask your audience a question, then do something with their answer(s). If some of them indicate that they have not heard of the topic, define the topic more fully. Check in with your audience to see whether your definition made sense.

- **Keep time:** The best way to make a good impression is to respect the time limit imposed on your presentation, though you don't want to be checking your watch every 30 seconds out of fear that you will run overtime. Rehearse your presentation many (at least three!) times to ensure that you are distributing your time well across slides/points. Avoid over-explaining the first slide or getting caught up in little details of a plot and be sure to leave time for a summary of key findings at the end. Ensure that each slide is contributing to communicating your key message. I kept non-essential slides in at the end of my presentation as ‘back-up’ in case I was questioned on it.
- **Simplify your language:** You are likely to present to mixed audiences made up of other researchers (both in and outside your field), high-status professors, experienced clinicians, policy makers, and members of the community that you are researching (e.g., people with diabetes in the case of my own research). While you may want tips on how to target these audiences separately, I think there is one suggestion that covers them all: Present for lay audiences. You don't need to prove your intellect with over-complicated jargon. My favourite presentations to watch are those where the presenter speaks as if they are talking to a non-researcher friend. Think about how you would summarize your research for your mum!



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- **Give your audience enough background:** You may be excited to present your data, but your data is only interesting if your audience understands what your topic is and why you have conducted this research. You should include enough information that any audience member could understand the context of your research. I experienced that this could be done in one slide with only a few bullet points. Rehearse your presentation with a friend from a completely different field to see whether they can figure out what the key message is and how you arrived there.
- **Don't rush your answers:** When asked a question, there is no shame in taking a short pause to consider your answer. You can even respond by indicating that you are reflecting on their question (“*Hm, let me think about that*”). This conveys that you are genuinely giving thought to their question and want to honour it by giving a carefully constructed response. Equally, if you don't know the answer, you can give yourself some time to think of one!

You may not feel able to implement all (or even most) of these suggestions immediately, particularly the more performative aspects. Instead, select one or two points that seem more realistic and focus on these for your next presentation. At the end of the day, practice really does make perfect. We simply need more exposure to this nerve-wracking situation so that we can get some evidence that it is not so bad after all. In fact, we might even find that we enjoy it and can use the opportunity to increase the impact of our research!

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