

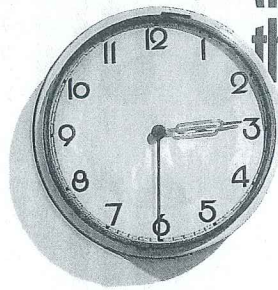


Compelling presentations

How do you present years' worth of material in 30 minutes?

by Shari Graydon

“It’s far better to leave audiences wanting more, than having them be relieved that you’ve finally finished.”



DELIVERING PRESENTATIONS is one of the foundations of scholarly work. But doing so outside of the classroom invariably poses different challenges. Becoming adept at crafting compelling presentations that engage a variety of audiences increases an academic's opportunities to get others excited about their work.

Think strategically

When presenting to audiences beyond the institution, identifying in clear and concrete terms what it is you most want those attending to learn from your talk will help to shape both what you say, and how. One of the most common mistakes that scholars make when presenting their research is to provide too much information. Conference timing constraints often mean you're allotted 30 minutes or less, as part of a packed program.

Key to a successful presentation is deciding in advance what aspects of the research will be of most interest to the people in the room, and making those the focus of your remarks. If you pique their interest, they'll ask questions at the end, giving you the opportunity to fill in the blanks. It's far better to leave them wanting to know more, than having them be relieved that you're finally finished.

Communicate impact

Although academic journals expect you to package information in terms of hypothesis, methodology, findings and recommendations, delivering

technical details to demonstrate your rigour in a presentation can often cause eyes to glaze over. A good question to ask yourself is, "If I were at a dinner party with friends, what part of my research would I be most likely to share? What would be most interesting to people not already familiar with the subject?" Most of the time, it's the impact – the piece that tells others why what you do matters, and why they should care.

Another useful way to think about this is to focus on the benefits, rather than the features, of your work. People who lack knowledge about a subject are usually more interested in concrete outcomes than the process that it took to arrive at them. If you're in a garden store looking for fertilizer, you're less keen to hear the details about what's in the various options than to know which one is going to make your grass grow.

Find the story

Research has found that people are significantly more likely to remember stories than data. That's partly because stories do usually illuminate impact and why people should care. Not all research boasts a clear or direct line to how some corner of humanity benefits from the work. If what you're doing is somewhat divorced from an end user, see whether you can impose a narrative structure onto the challenge you're exploring. You might make the problem the "villain" and some aspect of the solution the "hero," or you might describe the process as a quest or mystery, building suspense before revealing the results or conclusion.

Impose a structure

Sometimes it's helpful to impose a structure on the information you plan to relay and clearly state what the structure is at the outset. It's a way for you to rely less on notes and for your audience to both follow along and remember your content. Options include: problem/solution; myths vs. facts; or policy, consequence, alternative. Depending on the nature of your content, you might adopt the familiar list format: "Nine things you need to know about X," or "three ways to overcome Y." Although such conventions may seem simplistic, they can improve the impact and effectiveness of your talk.

Rehearse

The only thing that beats running through your presentation out loud in advance of delivering it to an audience is doing so in front of a friend or colleague who you trust to give you honest feedback. Sometimes what you think is fascinating and clear is boring and confusing to others. You want to discover that before you get to the conference, not by looking out at a room of people who have dozed off.

At very least, you need to time yourself delivering your content. Taking up more than your allotted time is disrespectful – both to the other presenters, who might end up with less time for their own talks, and to members of the audience, some of whom may have come to hear a presenter other than you. Whether you intend to or not, running over time communicates unpreparedness or arrogance. And it's a simple error to fix. **UA**