Presentations have become the de facto communication tool at conferences. There is an art and a science of creating great presentations. However, many conference presentations are delivered poorly. Here, the BASES Awards Committee share their expertise on how to avoid the Seven Deadly Sins of Presenting.

Too much text

Slides should be like a billboard. Ask yourself whether your message can be processed within three seconds. The audience should be able to quickly work out the meaning before turning its attention back to the presenter. You need to have enough words to ensure you are comfortable delivering the message, but go for a very low word count. Don’t use a font size smaller than 28 point.

Use something like, “Good morning, thank you for that introduction. It is well established that…”, and hence, begin with probably the first sentence of your abstract.

Prof Edward Winter FBASES, Sheffield Hallam University

Terrible time keeping

You have scanned the programme schedule over breakfast and you are excited about the day’s conference programme. The only problem is the tricky transition that you’ve spotted around 11 am. Should be OK though, you can hear the invited speaker talk about training adaptations and still have time to make it to the other room for that free communication that has direct relevance to your own research. The fast walk between rooms will also act as some additional exercise, it’s normally needed after a few nights at a conference. If only it was that simple. Well, it is if you are not at the mercy of the speaker who cannot tell the time. You know, the individual who insists on taking both their own allocated time in addition to a significant amount of that set aside for others as well.

I think I’ve lost count of how many presentations I have attended in which the speaker seems to have failed the first rule of presenting; i.e., respect your time. Understanding how long you have sets the framework for all of the major aspects of any presentation in my view (e.g., content, delivery style etc.). If you can’t get the timing right, the audience might feel uneasy, thus affecting how your presentation is received.

This nervousness is then, unintentionally, transmitted to the audience by the presenter. If the presenter looks/feels uneasy then the audience will feel uneasy, thus affecting how your presentation is received.

My experience is that when you go too fast people lose what you’re saying very quickly and, therefore, can lose interest very quickly. Sometimes I end up singing to myself, “slow down, you move too fast, you’ve got to make the moment last”. Finally, I’ve never ever had anybody give me feedback saying, “That was too slow”, except when talking about my running between the wickets in cricket matches.

Prof Ian Campbell, Brunel University

Death by special effects

Every new version of PowerPoint seems to have yet more special effects (e.g., text flying in, dissolving, changing colour etc.). For some presenters the temptation to use them all is just too great to resist. The effect on the audience is rather like watching a horror film, waiting anxiously for the next surprise. Having slides where the bullet points appear one at a time is also rarely helpful and usually makes the talk seem slower and more ponderous than it really is.

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Prof Ian Campbell, Brunel University

The Seven Deadly Sins of Presenting

Dr Claire Hitchings, British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences

You’ll also make a few new friends in the audience as well, as I’ve never heard anyone complaining that a session was a little short or ran exactly to time!

Dr Barry Dust, Liverpool John Moores University

Poor presenter presentation

A lot of time and effort is understandably spent on preparing the presentation, the information on the slides and the visual impact, but often the presenter forgets about themselves. Too often presentations suffer from a lack of presenter preparation. How are you going to do it? Where are you going to stand? What messages are you trying to send? What can you do with your hands? Many inexperienced presenters become nervous and start fidgeting. This includes walking around continually, rocking forwards and backwards, and putting hands in pockets behind the back only to then relocate them almost instantly.

Despite the fact that using a laser pointer on “acupuncture points can stimulate specific memories and innate wisdom” (Gordon, 2001), during scientific presentations the purpose of the laser pointer is to “highlight something of interest” (Wikipedia, 2010), not every word on the slide.

Dr Joanna Scru, University of Portsmouth

Laser pointers can be distracting for the audience rather than useful.

Unless there is some sort of “punchline” that you really do want to keep hidden until the last minute then just set up your slides to show all the points at once. One more thing – don’t use any of the super fancy fonts either – they are much harder to read.

Dr Vai Cox, Coventry University

Too fast

Over the years, one of the most frequent thoughts I have going through my head when I’m listening to a presentation is, “please slow down so that I can actually understand the story you are trying to tell me”. People have chosen to come and listen to your research story and want to get something from it.

You need to reduce your font size lower than this then my guess is that you have created a document, not a slide! If a slide has too many words, highlight one key word per bullet and rehearse the slide until you can remember all the content when you look only at the highlighted word. Then remove all other text leaving just the keywords as mnemonics. Even better, replace the words on the slide with an image.

Dr Stuart Cotterill, University of Gloucestershire

Laser pointer love

Imagine my distress at the last BASES Annual Conference when I reached for my laser pointer only to discover that it would not work on an interactive screen. Being forced to revert to a metre rule for highlighting key points in my presentation made me realise that there were few occasions when my laser pointer was necessary.

Time spent on the preparation of your slides should reduce the need for a laser pointer. The overzealous use of laser pointers can be distracting for the audience rather than useful.

Dr Hitchings, to help you with your conference presentation preparation. Visit www.bases.org.uk

Click, About and then click Publications, Documents and Policies

• BASES Guidelines for Oral Presentations
• BASES Guidelines for Poster Presentations
• BASES Guidelines for Preparing Abstracts

BASES has three brief guideline documents, written by Prof Edward Winter FBASES and Dr Claire Hitchings, to help you with your conference presentation preparation. Visit www.bases.org.uk

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References