Making a Presentation

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Overview: This tutorial offers hints for preparing and delivering effective presentations. The author closes with an illustration of how to approach a technical topic for a non-expert audience.

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1. Hints for Preparing Presentations

Who is your audience?
Sit with a friend and show them what you have done. Then use what you did as a model for your presentation. Your presentation will go best if it seems to you, to your client, to me, and to the rest of the audience as though you are just showing off your semester's work to your friends.

After you informally show off to a friend, record what you did.

Prepare a detailed outline
Your outline should have about 3-6 main points, with about 2-5 sub-points under each one. Make sure you list each topic you want to be sure to mention. Be sure that there is a clear organization, a clear flow from one point to the next.

Opening
Know exactly how you will start. If more than one person will be speaking, each person must know exactly how to start. Once you get started, you'll do fine.

Closing
Know exactly how you will stop. If more than one person will be speaking, each person must know exactly how to stop. Know how you will transition from one speaker to another.

Practice
You should run through your talk once or twice, preferably in front of a friend or classmate who can make suggestions. Don't deliver the talk so many times you get bored with it.

Questions
Be prepared for questions. Think of what people might want to know, and how you wish to respond.

"Accordion" talk
No matter how well you prepare and how much you practice, the presentation will not go exactly as you plan. Hence, you should plan in advance for parts you can completely leave out to save time and for portions you can add if find you have extra time.

Relax, be confident, and enjoy
You have done good work, and you should be pleased to have the chance to show it off.

2. Technical Talks for Non-Specialists

A colleague asked my advice for giving a research conference talk. He had been asked to survey his work for a group of specialists in an area different from his. He asked if he should give a basic talk.

A talk for non-specialists need not be basic. It should concentrate on what is important. Generically

- what is the problem
- why is it important
- what is the answer
- how did I get it
- how might you do the same on similar problems
- what are the consequences

It is rare that the details are important. The big picture is usually important.

One of the few talks on abstract algebra I ever really understood (and I've heard many) was by Paul Halmos. He had no reason to impress us with his cleverness or with how hard this stuff was, so he set about trying to make it clear. Sometimes it is the real expert who can afford to give an understandable talk; other must impress us. Perhaps it is only the real expert who has a deep and broad enough understanding himself to be able to make it clear.

I have come to see a conference talk not as the means of communicating information, but as an ad or a pointer variable. Your ad (talk) says, "Here is some stuff I know. If you'd like to know more, see me at coffee."

As in any communication, do your best to guess who is the audience, what are their interests, why are they in this room at all, and what action or changed neuron firings do you wish at the end of your talk. Details, even critical details, rarely achieve that, unless the goal really IS to impress them with your insight, e.g., job interview. Big picture, "Here is why you might want to look at this stuff," is usually more effective. That **often** means outlining advanced material. You don't interest people with stuff from a beginning class.

If your goal is genuinely that people come to understand, you'll do fine.