

Student Lunch Seminar

Tips on preparing for a presentation,
by Tim Kehoe, May 2001

Based on Tim Kehoe's notes for presenters in the annual Workshop on Macroeconomic Dynamics at Vigo

The organizing committee hopes that you receive valuable feedback on your research, that you learn a lot from the presentations of the other participants, and that you enjoy yourself during the workshop. Some of the participants from last year's workshop suggested that I come up with a list of suggestions on preparing to present your research. You should realize that these suggestions are based on my personal tastes about what I regard as a good presentation of economic research. Even if you disagree with some of them and choose to disregard them, however, I think that it would be worthwhile to read through these suggestions and to think about them:

1. The fundamental ingredient in a good presentation is preparation. Try to get a friend or two to listen to you practice the presentation and to give you suggestions. Try to practice the presentation more than once. (I know that you are asking a lot of a friend to listen to your presentation, but that is the sort of thing that friends are for, and, besides, you can offer to return the favor in the future in one way or another.)
2. When you are preparing transparencies, make sure that the font is large enough to be readable. If you use a word processor like Scientific Workplace and are not yet proficient enough at it to produce transparencies in large font and cannot find someone who knows how to do so, type the transparencies in a small font and then photocopy them on a photocopier that can blow up the image. (You will have to type the original in a corner of the page, but a little practice will result in decent transparencies.) Put a typical transparency of each sort that you will need - transparencies with equations, graphs, tables, whatever- on an overhead projector in a large seminar room, then go to the back of the room and make sure that you can read it.
3. An important byproduct of making sure that font is large enough to read is that it will prevent you from putting too much on each transparency. In fact, when you are preparing your transparencies, you should think about what is the point that each is supposed to make. You can be sure that, if you do not think about this sort of question ahead of time, you will have to do so during your presentation. One of the most common questions during a presentation is, What do you want us to learn from this transparency? or, more bluntly, Why did you put this transparency up? The practice presentations that you give to your friends and colleagues are good times to think about what your transparencies should look like. I usually find myself changing my transparencies and even the whole organization of the presentation a time or two as a result of the practice presentations.
4. When you are practicing your presentation, think about the mechanics. I have seen good presentations in which the speaker covers part of the transparency with a piece of paper and then slowly moves the piece of paper down uncovering more and more of the transparency or in which the speaker uses a pen to point to things or to highlight things on the transparency. In general, however, this sort of trick irritates me a lot: It tends to make the speaker look down at the projector and talk to the projector, rather than look at audience and talk to the audience. It also tends to block the view of the transparency of part of the audience. My preferred way of doing things is to stand back from the projector and to point to things on the screen, just as I would point to things on a chalkboard.
5. Pay attention to the time during your practices and during the presentation itself. You will have 50 minutes to present your work during the workshop (**60 minutes in the Student Lunch Seminar**). Remember, however, that some of the most important elements of each presentation are the questions and suggestions from the audience and the speaker's responses to them. You should probably prepare a presentation that would run 30-35 minutes without interruption (**40-45 minutes**). During the presentation in the workshop, you should be ready to add or subtract transparencies as you get closer to the end. I usually have a few extra slides that I think might be useful in answering questions and that I can also include in the presentation if I end up having more time than I had expected. Remember though that there is nothing wrong in finishing a presentation a few minutes early, but it is a crime to run over time!
6. Since time is precious to you in your presentation, you should think carefully about how you want spend it. Long introductions are almost always a bad idea. What the audience usually wants to learn during the introduction is what is the question that you intend to answer, why the question and the answer are important, and, probably,

what you answer is going to be. In general, audiences do not like research presentations to be mysterious. Surprise endings are fine for novels and films, but usually not for economic research.

7. Remember in preparing your introduction that the audience is probably not very interested in your own personal history of economic thought. If your research is closely related to other papers, it is worth briefly explaining the relationship. Long discussions of the literature and, in particular, transparencies with long lists of papers, are usually a waste of precious time during a presentation.

8. Even economic researchers who have not done well in presentations in the past and who think of themselves as bad public speakers can do a very good job presenting their work. The trick is to prepare and to practice!

You will learn a lot in preparing for your presentation. You can also learn a lot at the workshop from the other presentations. We will send out pdf files of all of the papers ahead of time. Try to take a look at the papers. A useful list of questions that I ask of myself when I am going through a paper before a presentation is: What question is this paper trying to answer? What sorts of tools does the author use to answer the question? What is the answer that the author comes up with and does it make sense to me?

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctpgga/SLS-tips.htm>