

Three Tips for Delivering Effective Presentations



ISEH Headquarters

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“A successful speech begins with great science and results from your daily hard work, champions are made in the pre-season.” Sean Morrison.

In preparation for our annual meeting, to be held in San Diego, our members have recently shared their advice on submitting “eye-catching” abstracts. If you did submit an abstract, you will soon find out from ISEH if your abstract has been selected, and whether it was chosen for an oral or a poster presentation. Oral presentations are a great opportunity to get you and your science noticed. If your abstract was chosen for an oral presentation, your science already got the reviewers’ attention, now it is time to close the deal and deliver an exciting and clear presentation. For the top students and postdocs, ISEH offers prizes for the best oral presentations, so it is a great opportunity to be recognized for your science and your communication skills.

The most successful scientists are those that not only excel at cutting-edge research, but also have a gift to get others excited about their findings. It is in your hands to master this skill. According to Sean Morrison, “all good communicators put a lot of effort into communicating clearly. I think a lot of young people make the mistake of thinking that people are born either good or bad communicators. The reality is that the good ones really work at it”.

Here are three tips to follow when preparing for an oral presentation.

1. Quality control

Quality control is our number one tip. A lack of quality control can ruin any presentation.

- Typos and misspellings can give a strong, negative message to your audience suggesting that if you did not take the time to review your presentation, you did not take the time to review your data.
- Sometimes technological mistakes can be stumbling blocks to a great presentation. Be sure to save your presentation in a format that is compatible across all possible platforms and take the time to upload your presentation before your session to ensure it displays correctly. Have at least two backups of your presentation. Having online (Dropbox, google docs, email) and hard copies (2 USB drives) in hand can save you if one method fails. If you are using videos in your presentation check in advance that those can be played.

- Practice the timing of your presentation. Going over time gives a strong message that you did not prepare your presentation, and that you think your time is more valuable than your audiences. To stay on time plan each slide perfectly, ensuring that each slide conveys only one point. Rushing your presentation or skipping slides does not compensate for bad planning. Michael Milssom advises, “Make a conscious effort not to rush what you are saying as you will lose the audience. If you have to talk fast to cover everything in your slides, then you have too much material in them. Better to take some data out and clearly get across the key points than to cram every experiment you ever did into a talk”.

2. Planning

Every presentation should be tailored for your audience, the type of event, the allocated time slot and even the country. You should never simply re-use a presentation, but if you choose to recycle some slides, be sure they are free of logos from a past meeting. For those who present in many languages, it is also important to ensure all of your slides are in the correct language. Prepare the content and design of each slide carefully. Slides for a presentation should not be exact copy-paste from a manuscript. Peter Van Galen advises, “Do not present too many panels per slide. Explain everything that is in the slide. The audience needs to be able to understand the rationale for the experiment, the actual results and your interpretation. Make your slides easy to read for your audience. One of the worst mistakes is to have chaotic slides and look like you haven’t seen them before. The audience will appreciate someone who is prepared to convey their message to the best of their abilities.” For many, the question and answer session after the presentation can be the most difficult as it is unpredictable. The most important thing is to listen to the question and answer in a thoughtful manner to the best of your knowledge. Be confident, but not defensive or aggressive. How you say things is as important as what you say. For questions where you are unsure of the answer, it is fine to say “Thank you for your interest. You bring up a good point to consider for future directions, but I do not have an answer for that question yet.”

3. Engagement

The best presenters engage their audience. A talk is a conversation; you might be at the podium, but you should not act as if you are in a different hemisphere. Face your audience, not the screen. Make eye contact with members of the audience. There are many resources you can use to improve your public speaking skills, including:

- Online courses: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/publicspeaking>
- Videos: Ted talks are a great resource - <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/The-Hope-and-Promise-of-Stem-Ce>
- Webinars: <http://www.iseh.org/news/159754/2013-Annual-Meeting-Recordings-Available.html>

Sharing your science is one of the most fun and most stressful parts of being a scientist. Practice makes perfect, so seize every opportunity with the zeal you give your benchwork and you are sure to succeed.

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