Tips on Giving a Short Geography Presentation *by Mark Fonstad*

PREPARING THE TALK:

1. **Your talk is an advertisement** for other people to talk with you more about your work afterwards, or for them to read a paper of yours, or to work with you. It is not a replacement for these things. People often try to put in WAY too much detail (and sometimes even too much content) into their talks. This leads listeners down the path of missing the big message of your talk, which you had better have figured out.

2. Presentations are should include three things. (1) **Communication** of your ideas, (2) **Persuasion** of others towards your viewpoint, and (3) **Entertainment** of the audience. Anything that doesn't serve these three things should be removed from your presentation.

3. **Have something interesting and unique to say.** You might be surprised how many presentations at national meetings spend lots of time talking about what the speaker is planning to do in the future, or all the things that have been done on the topic in the past. A little of those things go a long way. Work hard to make sure you have at least some interesting results to show, or new interpretations of old results, or something else that will be of interest to an academic audience.

4. **One of the biggest mistakes many speakers make is assuming that a talk can be arranged and presented as if it were a written document.** That can't be done well. The reason is that human brains process written information quite differently than audiovisual information. One example of the difference is in material organization. In a paper, it is common to write a logical, linear argument building up to a conclusion at the end. The problem with this approach in a talk is that if an observer misses the point of a single slide, all could be lost. A much better approach to organization is the "onion" model. START with your main message, PROCEED by adding content depth in successive layers around the main message, always returning to the main message between layers. Since the main message and the main ideas are repeated often, a listener can still follow most of the talk even after dozing off for a minute. Also the talk does not get into trouble near the end when the speaker is running out of time, because by then, the most important things have been said already and the speaker has no reason to worry.

5. Either extemporaneously speak, memorize your talk, or speak off of notecard notes. **DO NOT construct slides with a main intention being that you can read off of them.** The main rule is this: Minimize words and maximize images. You don't want your audience to have to read – you want them to THINK.

Many, many students put lots of text on slides as a mental crutch because they haven't practiced enough and are trying to lower their stage fright. It just makes things worse for the viewer. In some rooms, it is hard for the speaker to even see the screen very well, so you certainly shouldn't be relying it for your own speaking.

6. **Geographers often have a problem of spending way too much of their precious time talking about all the extraneous details of their study area**, rather than focusing just on those study area qualities of importance to their own study. This will quickly eat up most of your time.

7. **Ruthlessly remove as much text as possible from your slides.** I rarely have more than a couple of lines of text on a slide, and as a result I can show a lot more figures and people remember these images much better.

8. **Bulleted lists are just about the worst things to put in a Powerpoint presentation.** Lists like this work well for communicating information in written documents, but not in verbal ones. People can read through these lists faster than you can speak them, meaning you will disconnect your audience's thoughts from your own voice. Also, bulleted lists are one more way of keeping you from looking at the audience; your tendency will be to read the bullets.

9. **Fonts smaller than about 24 point basically can't be seen well by much of an audience.** I often use 38 point text and 42-50 point titles. As wise speakers rarely put more than twelve words on a slide, there's plenty of room.

10. Avoid black text on simple white backgrounds. A great deal of controversy about whether or not to use light text on dark background versus dark text on light backgrounds exists, but here is the simple fact: **if most of your slide is filled with a figure, then it doesn't matter what the background color scheme is.** Avoid multi-color backgrounds or backgrounds with complicated pictures; they distract from your figures.

11. **Don't use** (a) fancy fonts, (b) fancy slide changes, or (c) Powerpoint "chartjunk". All of this stuff simply is a distraction and it annoys some people.

12. **Avoid complicated software setups.** Try to avoid preparing a short talk that requires you having the internet, or needed special software (such as GIS) beyond a presentation package such as Powerpoint. Even embedding video into your powerpoint presentation sometimes causes problems when your talk is moved to a new computer.

13. Unlike printed documents, **projected slides do not need wide margins.** Yet most speakers put wide bands of empty space on the border of every slide. I feel that they are taunting the audience: "I could have used a readable font and big pictures, but I decided to do extra work to make them illegible."

14. **Don't try to cram too much into a single slide.** It is distracting and can make some things too small to see. It costs nothing extra to put some things on another slide.

15. **Neatness is a good quality**. Have you looked for typos, incorrect punctuation, poorly written sentences, garish figure colors, and non-matching fonts?

16. **Standards apply.** Just as in a written document, cite others if you are projecting their words or figures. Similarly cite them if you are rephrasing their ideas. If someone gave you money to do your research, be respectful and thank them for doing so in your presentation.

17. **Simplicity is the best aesthetic.** Your audience has very little time to absorb what's on your slide, especially with you nattering on all the time. Some people put accretions like project logos, the talk title, and the conference name on every page. Don't.

18. You are giving a short presentation, so **there is absolutely no need to waste time talking about how you are going to give your talk and in what order.** Dispense with the "talk outline" slide. These organizational slides might be needed for longer presentations (and I emphasize the word "might"), but they don't help significantly in a short talk.

19. **Quality visual information such as graphs and maps are paramount.** You are a geographer. This is supposed to be your forte. Poor figure composition will be noticed in an instant. I spend most of my talk preparation time on one thing: making my figures look aesthetically pleasing and easy to use for introducing often complex information.

20. **Do your slide titles emphasize the right thing?** Go through all of them after you have the rest of the presentation worked out, I bet you can improve a third of your slide titles, or perhaps even remove extraneous titles altogether.

21. **Emulate excellent speakers**; do not emulate bad ones. One or two of my professors were atrocious speakers, and one or two of them were excellent speakers. Think about those you have heard. Don't emulate your advisor unless he or she is a good speaker.

22. **Practice.** Out loud. To other people if possible. Want to be more confident about your talk? Practice again. Want to be unconfident? Don't practice. Practicing makes your talks more efficient and elegant, removes a great deal of discomfort, improves confidence, and helps you reduce negative nonverbal communication, such as body fidgeting.

GIVING THE TALK:

1. **Make sure the computer is ready.** Turn off the screensaver, make sure it isn't about to prompt you for update installations, etc. All of this slows you down and distracts from your message. If you are putting your talk on someone else's computer, make sure to go through your slides at least once to make sure the new computer doesn't mess anything up in your presentation.

2. **Opening.** Begin by stating your name, even if you have already been introduced. Then say, in one sentence, what you intend to accomplish in your short presentation.

3. **Speak from the gut, not the throat.** I deliberately lower the pitch of my voice from my normal tone and also speak slightly more loudly than I think is necessary for the audience. For whatever socio-evolutionary reasons, this helps establish your legitimacy and authority on the subject of which you speak. Most people speak too quietly in presentations.

4. **Two sentences describing why your work is important to your mother-in-law** is a useful strategy to pull in members of your audience. This forces you to (a) think of how to characterize the nature and importance of your work in two sentences, and (b) construct these two sentences in a way that can be understood by anyone, even your mother-in-law.

5. Be a **storyteller;** there are few things as interesting and memorable as watching someone reveal their mental thought-process. Imagining you're a storyteller also helps break the possibility of speaking in drone; instead you induce a rhythm or cadence where you lead into important sections with a rising speed and volume, and then descend in between major points to give your audience a chance to reflect on things. A storytelling philosophy also helps break monotone speaking and injects a singing-like quality that audiences respond to positively.

6. **Moving** a bit while you speak, such as by pointing to a figure with the body as well as the hand, or by addressing a particular part of the audience, draws people into your talk. Standing still while you're speaking may put people to sleep. Don't overdo moving, however, or it can distract from your speaking.

7. **Silence** is a very useful thing in a couple of situations. If you're not immediately sure what to say, say nothing for a few seconds. The audience may think you're deliberately giving them a chance to breathe. Also, Leaving a bit of silence after saying something important will give the audience a chance to think.

8. Talk to the **audience**, not the screen. Don't look at the screen unless it is necessary, don't look at the computer screen unless necessary. Speak directly to the audience, and share your gaze around the room.

9. **Be prepared to skip** specific slides if you realize during the presentation that you're taking too long. I actually plan for this, noting which slides won't destroy the nature of the entire talk if they are skipped.

10. **Watch your time carefully.** Some of the worst talk horror stories are about people who go over time and then won't stop when asked to do so.

11. **Watch your audience.** They can occasionally send clues of importance to you. Do they all look puzzled? Are they all checking their watches? Are they looking through their papers rather than looking at you? All of these situations can be fixed by you, the speaker, to a large degree IF you notice the audience clues.

12. **Keep control of your audience.** You only have a few minutes to present on a topic you may have worked on for months. You need every second. If someone in the audience is being distracting, ask them kindly to please keep the noise down. Rarely, you may have audience members who will try and interrupt you mid-talk. In a short presentation, you don't have time to respond to people with full answers, so be bold and ask that questions be held until the end of your presentations.

13. Use a **physical pointer** or your arm if possible. Laser pointers are difficult to hold steadily, especially in big rooms. If you must use a laser pointer, point it at one thing and hold it still; don't try to circle or underline things with it, it is just annoying.

14. **Never meta-comment** on your talk. Remarks such as "I am out of time, I'll have to talk quickly" don't help you, they just suggest to the audience that you're not in control of your own talk. Similarly, don't apologize for something you've done or will do in your talk. Negative criticism is bad enough, the worst is when it comes from you.

15. Work hard to finish **early**, even slightly earlier than the traditional "two minutes for questions". If you have been interesting, some of the best transfer of information comes during these spaces, and you will be better remembered for them.

16. **Wrap up with a bang.** What is the main thing the audience should take away from your talk? Restate it with emphasis and interest.

17. **Closing.** Always end your talk by saying "Thank you." It is not pretentious—you are doing the audience a favor. If you do not cue the audience so they know when to applaud, they will be confused and irritated. Like most social rituals, the thanks-applause sequence comforts everyone. Do not ask for questions until you complete it.

18. **When taking questions,** repeat the question you have been asked, then pause for a moment to think of the best answer. Remember that the audience enjoys watching a person's thought processes, and it makes the question asker feel like they have asked something important if you have to think on it rather than just shouting back an answer. It is perfectly acceptable to answer a question with "I don't know" if you truly "don't know".