

HOW TO SURVIVE A SEMINAR PRESENTATION

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As we approach the annual AEA meetings and the season of job talks it might be helpful to highlight some of the do's and don'ts of seminar presentation. While most of the following is targeted towards those presenting a seminar/job talk for the first time, many of the points are probably worth remembering even for those of us who have become veterans in the profession.

1.) How do you get seminar presentation experience if you do not already have it?

You should always try to find a way of presenting your work on "friendly grounds" before going out on the job market. If you can, present your paper in a seminar at your own department first. It may be useful to set up an informal seminar series where you and other job candidates present mock job talks in front of sympathetic faculty and students. Ask friends who are sitting in on your mock job talk to take notes on things that might help improve the presentation, and also to interrupt your talk as they would if an outside speaker were presenting a seminar. Also, consider having yourself videotaped presenting your paper; watch the tape and note areas for improvement, however painful it may be.

2.) What are some of the useful materials you should distribute for a seminar?

If you have 1 - 1 1/2 hours for your talk you should ensure that your audience has a copy of the paper or at least a handout of the major points and findings you will be covering. If your paper is distributed but you also do a handout make the numbering of tables in the handout and your paper match. If you find yourself reordering the tables in your talk from the way they are presented in your paper maybe you should re-write the paper!

3.) What about overheads?

Many novices (and probably even more veterans) have difficulties in handling overheads. While more and more talks seem to rely on overheads they are neither necessary nor sufficient for a successful presentation. What the overheads do is keep you from making silly mistakes on the blackboard (it is amazing how the mind goes blank when facing that wall), they speed up the presentation, and they keep you on track. However, passing out a handout with the key equations or results can be equally useful. If you do use overheads remember that the typeface that looks great on the printed page may result in bleary eyes and headaches for your audience. Make sure that you use a font that is large enough so that even a person in the back of a large room could see the numbers. One rarely goes through every number in a table in a presentation so consider redoing your tables so that you present only a subset of results. Limit the number of overheads you actually use. You do not need to put everything on an overhead that you are going to say, and you should not merely read your overheads. The overhead is a summary device for each section of your talk that leaves a visual impression on your audience of what your work is all about.

4.) A bad presentation can destroy a good paper but a great presentation cannot resuscitate a bad paper.

Often in the rush to complete the last computer runs or derive one more proof for a paper an author can end up with very little time left to actually prepare a presentation. As a result, even though you may have path breaking findings your audience may be left cold if you have not taken the time to organize your thoughts and materials. One of the classic mistakes first time presenters often make is to spend too much time reviewing the literature and introducing the topic, leaving little time to present their novel contributions and results. While an hour and a half may seem like an eternity, time flies, especially if the audience interrupts with questions. Don't leave yourself too little time to show off your results. At the same time, impressive graphics cannot hide a weak paper. Make sure that you have nailed down the key findings of your paper before you worry about the presentation.

5.) How do you handle a person in the audience who does not want to let you get on with your presentation?

This is not an easy problem to deal with, especially in the context of a job talk when you are trying to show how well you could fit in with everyone in the department. It may be helpful before your talk to discuss with the person organizing the seminar what the etiquette of the seminar is. In general, even if it is the policy that no one interrupts for an hour you may want to tell your audience that if they have a point of clarification to feel free to interrupt. This helps you get a sense of how your talk is going. For the person who is not allowing you to get on with your presentation the following lines may be helpful: "That is an interesting point that I will be addressing in the next part of my talk. But please raise it again if you still have questions." Alternatively, if you feel you have spent as much time as you want on an issue or it is really quite tangential to your presentation try "That is an intriguing issue. Let's talk more about that after the seminar" and then move on. Sometimes you just have to be a little tough and say something like "As I have already stated I addressed this issue in xyz way and now I would like to move on to the rest of my presentation". Then press on. At this point you may actually hear a sigh of relief from the audience because they have probably gotten bored with the discussion if it is just coming from one person. Plus they want to ask their questions on the next section of your paper!

Finally, someone may identify an apparent mistake or issue with your paper that you have never considered before that may dramatically alter your conclusions or approach. You might not always be able to process these comments online and edit your talk accordingly. If this happens, just remember that this is why you do seminars before you send your paper off to a journal! Try to reach a compromise with the person making the observation that you will consider their point more carefully after the seminar but for the moment you would like to move on with the paper assuming your research strategy is correct. Then you may wish to leave some time at the end to consider how the results may change.

6.) How should your seminar change if you are presenting in an AEA session?

Remember that in most AEA sessions you will only have 15-30 minutes to present your paper. Four or five overheads summarizing your model, findings, and conclusions will be the most you

can/should present. Do not spend time summarizing the existing literature or discussing detailed technical issues.

More generally, tailor your talk to take into account the time restrictions and the technical background of your audience. However, never forget to share your enthusiasm for your findings with your audience so that they leave the seminar enthused as well.

GUIDELINES FOR BEING A DISCUSSANT

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A good discussant can be immensely helpful to an author, and can contribute significantly to a conference session by helping the audience to better understand the author's paper and by making the session both more interesting and lively. A poor discussant can destroy the confidence of an author and can set a tone that no one finds either engaging or enjoyable. To be a good discussant takes time and attention. Don't agree to serve as discussant unless you are willing to make the effort. Here are some suggested guidelines for being a good discussant.

1. Show up. If you have made a commitment to serve as a discussant, keep it.
2. Be prompt. It is insulting to everyone if you arrive just in time to present your comments.
3. Read the paper in advance. If you have not received the paper two weeks before the session, take the initiative: telephone the author. The paper may have gotten lost in the mail.
4. Comment on the paper (or papers) that you have been assigned. Do not use the session as a forum for presenting your own research or for delivering your analysis of the President's new tax bill.
5. Restate succinctly the main point or points of the paper. Include a short description of the paper's objective, the techniques used to achieve this objective, the findings, and the paper's contribution. If the author has made all of this quite clear in his or her preceding presentation, you can cut short this part of your discussion.
6. State what you like about the paper. If you do not like anything about the paper, try to find something positive to say (e.g. "this is a very important topic" or "I learned...").
7. Present your analysis of the paper. Provide positive suggestions about how the paper can be improved, rather than simply listing its deficiencies.
8. Prepare your comments to fit the time allotted. Rehearse your presentation, if necessary, to correctly judge its length.
9. Do not read your comments.
10. Treat the author with professional courtesy. Remember, you will be in a similar position at a future conference!