Tips for Presentations

Here are a few tips that I use when preparing my own presentations and also when helping my graduate (and undergraduate) students to prepare to give presentations at conferences, for defenses, job interviews, etc. Of course, everyone has their own style and things that work for them, but these are a few things that I've found to definitely be true and helpful for me, and quite generally so for my students as well.

Here are the steps that I follow when preparing a presentation:

(1) Outline the main topics to be covered.

(2) Based on the time limit for your presentation, decide on a rough division of time to be dedicated to each main topic. This should be done so that the most important topics and/or the most complex to describe receive the most time. This can be a tough step because it requires determining the balance of the talk. It is very important, though, so that the main message of your presentation is clear to the audience.

(3) Based on the allowed time for each topic, fill in the list of points to be covered for each topic.

(4) Read through the full outline and determine if the balance seems correct (i.e. are the most important topics receiving the most time, etc.) and make adjustments as necessary (adding and removing points from each topic).

(5) Once the outline is complete and correctly balanced, make the slides. (If slides are made earlier in the process, it is very easy to overload less important sections and thus use up too much time which should be spent on more important sections.)

(6) Go through your slides several times, from beginning to end, mentally thinking about what you want to say for each slide. DO NOT plan on reading the text from slides verbatim. Only for a very few, very important, statements should you read the text directly off of a slide. In general, slides should contain much less text than is spoken, and that text should capture the highlights of what you'll be saying.

(7) Once you've determined roughly what you'd like to say for each slide, make an outline on paper which lists the slides which begin each of your main topics and the time at which you expect to begin each of those slides during your talk. This should come from the total amount of time you get for your talk and the time division you decided in step (2).

(8) Now, perform your entire presentation OUT LOUD. You will find that the speed at which you cover things changes dramatically between when you are "speaking" in your head vs. out loud. Have a timer sitting on the table in front of you, along with the outline from (7) which contains the times that you should arrive at particular slides. Each time you do this, write down the time that you actually arrived at each of those slides to help you determine which are taking too long/not as much time as expected.

(9) At this point, if you are anything like me, you will discover that you have horribly over/under-estimated the time needed for various sections of your talk. Now you will need to make several iterations where you adjust your slides and the comments that you intend to make for each so that you

can get within a reasonable approximation of the timing outline from (2). Of course, you can adjust that timing outline based on your current experience of how long each section requires, but in general you should probably try to stay somewhat close to it because it was ideally developed somewhat objectively with the main goals of the talk in mind.

(10) Once you have tuned your talk to the point that each section and the entire talk takes the desired amount of time (without you having to talk like an auctioneer) and you have (roughly) memorized what you will say for each slide, give your talk to somebody. Just like the transition from giving it silently to out loud, you will find that the speed at which you talk (and even the things that you think you should say) will change when you are speaking to an actual person.

(11) During all of your practice talks, keep a timer going and your timing outline from (7) in front of you and note your times for each section. They should be starting to converge and after more practice runs there should be much less variability.

(12) You are done practicing and ready to give the actual presentation. Even during the actual presentation, keep your timer on the podium along with the list of times for arriving at slides. (As a bonus tip, I tend to use my phone as my timer. However, after a few minutes of inactivity the screen normally shuts off. While I'm practicing this isn't usually an issue because I can frequently touch the screen to keep it alive, but during actual presentations I can't always do that. Therefore, I have to adjust the time period for inactivity after which my phone's screen shuts off.) Having the timer and list in front of you will help you know if/when you need to speed up or can slow down during your presentation. I have seen many people skip this step and then panic during their actual presentations and totally mess up their timing. Doing this will give you peace of mind that you are on pace.

I know that that may look like a pretty daunting set of steps and a ton of overkill, but many of them don't take very long, and especially for short talks it doesn't take long to practice them. Also, the more you do this series of steps, the quicker and easier it will be for you to prepare well-timed presentations which still manage to focus on the right content for the right amounts of time.