

Your Fifteen Minutes of Fame



Dr. T's



Professional Pointers

The ubiquitous conference presentation. Thousands are given each year in our profession. With this many chances to present and/or witness presentations, you would expect that scholars in our field would learn how to give a good fifteen minute talk. This would seem all the more obvious when you consider that the vast majority of conference presenters are also professors who regularly engage in public speaking in the college classroom. Practice makes perfect, right? Or, at a minimum, practice should lead to minor improvements, yes?



No! Most conference presentations remain stagnant and boring. And the stagnation and boredom are only exacerbated by the uncomfortable hotel chairs the audience is forced to sit in during these conferences.

**The profession may be beyond repair
... but it is not too late to save yourself!**

Dr. T has a reputation – rightly or wrongly deserved – for giving dynamic conference presentations. Some people would call him unpredictable or clownish. Nonetheless, he remains in high demand for speaking engagements, and is well recognized on the conference circuit. While I do not expect you to approach your conference presentation with the same unpredictability or offbeat humor of yours truly, I still can offer you a few professional pointers on how to spice up your presentation and earn your rightful 15 minutes of fame (not infamy).

Fifteen Minutes Means Fifteen Minutes. Actually, it means twelve. No conference paper that you write will ever contain more than twelve minutes of basic information. If it does, you just wrote a book. Even then, your book is probably too long. Common courtesy demands that you stick within the time frame that the panel chair has allocated you, even if others don't do the same. When practicing your talk in a mirror, realize that 10 minutes in a practice run will translate into 15 minutes in reality. Always try to run short because you will inevitably run long. (Admittedly, Dr. T violates this rule about 95% of the time. Do as I say, not as I do.)

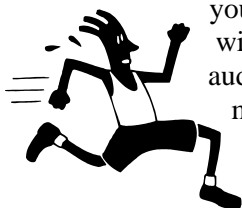
The Standard Format. While standardizing your presentation to fit a common format may appear to quash all your creative instincts, it is important to realize that the standard format is standard for a reason – it works! Most all great works of literature follow a standardized format. Conference presentations are no different. Until you become the James Joyce of conference presentations, stick to the format. Period. Here is how the format goes (in order of appearance):



- *Hook.* An interesting anecdote or hypothetical situation is a nice way to bring people into your talk. This anecdote can serve as an “anchor” on which you come back to illustrate your theory or evidence, and to play around with intellectually during the Q&A session.¹ In other words, if somebody asks a tough (or stupid) question, you can always say, “let me illustrate with the story that I began with...”)
- *Question.* A single intriguing question (which may substitute for the “hook” above) is essential. If you don’t have a question, that means you don’t have an answer, and if you don’t have an answer you have no reason to be presenting. While your paper may contain more than one question, your presentation should only focus on a single question to answer. Feel free to note briefly that there are some other ancillary questions that arise, but keep the focus on the one question.
- *An explanation.* Follow up the question with a brief, abstract theoretical answer to your question. Note: this reveals my deductive bias, but even inductive research should have some causal explanation behind it. A much more inductive paper may want to place the “evidence” section of the talk before the “explanation.”
- *Evidence.* Present the proof for your explanation in the most concise, neat and understandable manner possible.
- *Conclusion.* Other questions that remain (to “plant” questions for the Q&A section) or implications of the study.

Never, Ever Read Your Paper. If you are in a graduate program, we all assume you can read,² no need to prove this. Remember, you wrote the paper so you should know what is in it. The best thing to do is to practice your talk *without the aid of notes*. Give a practice talk to your dog or a house plant sans notes. See what you remember from the paper. In short, this tactic also will help you distill what is really important in your paper and help you shorten the talk. (On a side note, people who read their notes often end up shaking their notes because they are nervous. If I smell the least amount of fear I move in for the kill. We are a predatory species; others will do the same.)

Exercise. Academics are notoriously overweight and, given the performance of our department’s intramural teams, we are also out of shape. No academic ever died from too much aerobics! Use your presentation as a chance to get up and move about. First, standing up and moving will release you from being anchored to your notes. You will be able to “work” the audience a bit more by moving towards various people throughout the talk. When you move about in a casual (not frenetic) manner, it leaves the impression that you are both comfortable and confident with your presentation. Plus, think of all the calories you will burn.



¹ Here’s an example. Let us say that you are presenting a paper on why Muslims can’t seem to form large interest groups in Europe. I would start with this. “In early 2004, the French government prohibited Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in public schools. This act enraged many within the Islamic community and through newspaper reports and editorials threatened to become an explosive issue. However, on March 1st, only 3,000 people showed up in Paris to protest the new law. Why did Muslims have such a hard time rallying support around a volatile issue? This gets us to the more general question of why Muslims in Europe have failed to generate any peak interest group organizations, unlike other religious groups.” Now you have a story about Muslim women failing to mobilize a large protest movement to illustrate your points and gives you a story with which to illustrate other points.

² This may not be true of some Ivy League schools, but I won’t name names here. (Just kidding...kind of.)

Be Visual. Use color transparencies, if possible (though they tend to be expensive). Your transparencies should follow the format outlines above. The first transparency should be the talk title, your name and your affiliation. This transparency should be displayed while you give your “hook.” (Alternatively, you might have some nice visual aid to “hook” your audience.) Follow the first transparency with one containing the question. Then splash up another transparency for the answer. Try to use only one transparency for this, but you could go to two if needed. Next will be all the evidence. Try to minimize the amount of information you provide and make sure any tables or figures are easy to understand. (Test them out on a friend.) Figures (i.e., charts or pictures) are easier to comprehend than tables with lots of numbers. Finish up with a transparency summarizing your conclusion and/or implications.



Make use of headings on your transparencies. For instance, label your question as “question.” Label your conclusions as “conclusions.” This might seem stupid, but it actually helps people organize *your* thoughts in *their* minds.

Clip art is another way to spice up a talk. A simple picture can serve as a mnemonic device or simply give people something nice to look at. I generally try to stay with a theme – similar style clip art or all “live” photos. Don’t get too cutesy with clip art, though; “Hello Kitty” does not go well in an academic presentation, unless you are Dr. T and can pull it off with humor and grace.

PowerPoint is generally not recommended for a 15 minute presentation. It takes that long to set up the laptop and get the projector working. Plus, if it doesn’t work, you look dumb. And most people are so horrible at PowerPoint that simple transparencies are more dynamic. If you ever do PowerPoint, though, always have transparencies as backups; high technology has been known to fail.

In general, I strongly urge you to avoid handouts. Giving people a sheet to look at increases the likelihood they won’t pay attention to what you are saying and will boost the odds of doodling.

Humor. This is a hard area to coach. If, by nature, you are not a jester, I would not recommend trying to force humor into your presentation. You should be comfortable with delivery as there is nothing more pathetic than a joke delivered poorly. Nonetheless, humor (including a bit of gentle self deprecation or humility) can help keep the audience awake, engaged and on your side. Indeed, humor often helps to diffuse “battles to the death” with your academic enemies. (Yes, you do have academic enemies, whether you know it or not. If you do not have an academic enemy yet, please feel free to recruit me.)



Know Yourself, but Be Passionate. You need to know who you are and be true to that self. If you are a naturally pensive person, walking around the room and waving your arms (like Dr. T) probably won’t work for you. It will be uncomfortable and will appear unnatural. If you are intellectually playful, don’t be afraid to take a few chances with some odd questions or examples tossed out to the audience. No matter who you are, you still need to convey your passion for what you are talking about. It is likely that the reason you wrote a paper is because you were tickled by a puzzle; it was interesting to you. Make it interesting to everyone else by showing your curiosity or enthusiasm, no matter if you do it in a sedate or maniacal style. (Hint: This is the key secret to good teaching. If you are generally interested in a topic, you will be a good teacher if you can convey your interest and enthusiasm. If you aren’t interested in the topic, choose a different profession.)

Be Nervous and Confident. Wow! That sounds contradictory, but it is not. You should always have some minimal level of anxiety before public speaking. Such low-level tension will help keep you alert. It also indicates that you care about doing a good job and don't want to be embarrassed by a lame performance. Dr. T is always nervous before speaking before a class. If I ever lose that nervous feeling I will know it is time to quit since I won't care anymore. Nonetheless, too much anxiety will make you vomit and that truly is embarrassing at a conference. (You will earn the nickname "The Puking Prof.") Before you walk into the conference room, stop and take a deep breath. Tell yourself that you know the material. In fact, you probably know your material better than anybody in that room and that should give you some confidence. If you do make an error at some point during the talk, shrug it off and continue. Ichiro had a horrible April in 2004 before breaking the major league mark for most hits. I'm not sure how that is relevant, but it sounds inspiring.



Practice. Practice increases confidence. However, you need to practice correctly. Just as I urge with taking exams, you need to step away from your notes. Go off in a corner without any notes and give your talk to a bowl of oatmeal. When you are on the airplane, close your eyes and run through the talk in your head, envisioning how the room may appear, what the audience might look like and what questions might be asked. This is "mind prep." Put yourself in the shoes of somebody in the audience and try to come up with difficult questions. Then try to answer these questions. Imagine yourself talking directly to one of your harshest critics. Think of a humorous response. (Most of Dr. T's funny "off the cuff" remarks were actually envisioned during his practice sessions.) This is another version of role playing and allows your creative juices to flow and will also help you find weak spots in your paper.

Try This If You Dare. Dr. T is increasingly giving conference presentations with minimal preparation. He usually does the "mind prep" while walking to the conference room. This leads to a much more extemporaneous and lively presentation. However, you really must be confident in your speaking abilities and research to do this... or just plain stupid.

