

TIPS ON PREPARING FOR THE WORKSHOP

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The organizing committee hopes that you receive valuable feedback on your research, that you learn a lot from the presentations of the other participants, and that you enjoy yourself during the workshop. Some of the participants from previous workshops suggested that I come up with a list of suggestions on preparing to present your research.

Communication of results is an essential component of economic research. Many economists prefer attending conferences, workshops, and seminars to reading working papers and journal articles as a way of picking up ideas. Good presenters are invited more often to present their results at conferences, workshops, and seminars than are bad presenters. In what follows, I provide advice on preparing for presentations. You should realize that these suggestions are based on my personal tastes about what I regard as a good presentation of economic research. Even if you disagree with some of these suggestions and choose to disregard them, however, I think that it would be worthwhile to read them through and to think about them:

1. The fundamental ingredient in a good presentation is preparation. Try to get a friend or two to listen to you practice the presentation and to give you suggestions. Try to practice the presentation more than once. (I know that you are asking a lot of a friend to listen to your presentation, but that is the sort of thing that friends are for, and, besides, you can offer to return the favor in the future in one way or another.) Your friend does not have to be studying the same field of economics as you are. In fact, learning how to explain things to someone not in your field is an important skill. Practicing with someone not in your field will help you focus on being clear. (Of course, if you are going to be presenting to economics researchers, you want to practice with a friend who has training in economics.) Do not just use the sessions only to practice what words you will say: Be willing to change the organization and style of your presentation if your practice audience seems confused.
2. In preparing for a presentation of your research, one of the first things that you will need to decide is whether to use a computer projector or an overhead projector. Sometimes the venue where you are invited to speak does not have a computer projector. In that case, the choice has been made for you. If you do have a choice, I suggest using the computer projector. Some researchers have become proficient at using transparencies, but, with a little work they can become as good or better at using the computer projector. Slides projected by the computer are cleaner than transparencies and, if you set things up ahead of time, are always well centered. Furthermore, using the computer projector prevents presenters who have developed bad habits using transparencies from engaging in these habits, especially the habit of talking down to the overhead projector while pointing to lines on a transparency, slowly moving a piece of paper that covers the transparency down to reveal more and more “secrets,” or writing on the transparency. Every once in a while, I have seen a good presenter use a trick like this,

but, in general, anything that makes the presenter look down at the overhead projector rather than up at the audience is a bad habit. At the end of these suggestions, I provide some specific suggestions on preparing and using both computer slides and transparencies.

3. When you are preparing slides, use landscape layout and make sure that the font is large enough to be readable — the normal text should be at least 22 font. Put a typical slide of each sort that you will need — slides with equations, graphs, tables, whatever — on a projector in a room of the size in which you will present, and then go to the back of the room and make sure that you can read it. If you use a word processor like Scientific Workplace and are not yet proficient enough at it to produce transparencies in large font, you need to find someone to help you or you need to change to another word processor.

4. An important byproduct of making sure that font is large enough to read is that it will prevent you from putting too much on each slide. In fact, when you are preparing your slides, you should think about what is the point that each is supposed to make. You can be sure that, if you do not think about this sort of question ahead of time, you will have to do so during your presentation. One of the most common questions during a presentation is, What do you want us to learn from this slide? or, more bluntly, Why did you put this slide up? (This happens during presentations in which the audience is engaged. In presentations where the audience is too “polite” to ask such questions, they just start dozing off or thinking of something else.) The practice presentations that you give to your friends and colleagues are good times to think about what your slides should look like. I usually find myself changing my slides and even the whole organization of the presentation a time or two as a result of the practice presentations.

5. Keeping one idea to a slide also reduces the need for the “slide with lots of secrets.” Some presenters who use transparencies cover a slide with a sheet of paper and slowly move it down to reveal more and more of the slide. There are some presenters who do this well — probably because they are good natural presenters, not because of this trick — but presenters who do not do it well can irritate the audience. To be on the safe side, it is best to keep one idea to a slide. Using landscape layout and a computer projector tends to reduce the possibility for using this trick, but I have seen presenters use MS PowerPoint in much the same way: New ideas, sometimes in bright colors, come flying into the slide from all over the place. While I can imagine that this sort of device can be effective if used sparingly, it can quickly become distracting and irritating.

6. If your presentation has graphs in it, make sure they are readable. Although many software packages can make graphs, some require a bit of human capital to make graphs that look good in presentations. The best software package for making graphs is probably MS Excel, but you need to learn how to use it. Start every graph by getting rid of the grey background or set up a default graph without it. In general, use text boxes to label lines rather than the “1980s style” legend feature. Make sure that all the axis labels are large enough to read. Try to avoid putting too many graphs on one slide. If you are not going to say anything about a graph, then do not include it. If you are using black and white slides, then make sure your graphs use dashed lines or other devices (besides color) to differentiate between the different variables that are plotted.

7. When you are practicing your presentation, think about the mechanics. My preferred way of doing things is to stand back from the projector and to point to things on the screen, just as I would point to things on a chalkboard. Standing near the projector while talking tends to make the speaker look down at the projector and talk to the projector, rather than look at audience and talk to the audience. It also tends to block the view of the screen of part of the audience. The good thing about computer projectors is that they provide less of a temptation for the nervous presenter to hover over than does an overhead projector. (That said, all of us have probably encountered the humorous image of a presenter who has developed the bad habit of pointing to lines on a transparency on an overhead projector but who is now using a computer projector. The presenter is so intent on looking down at the computer rather than up at the audience that he or she is obviously pointing to lines on the computer screen totally oblivious to an audience that can only guess what is going on.)

8. Pay attention to the time during your practices and during the presentation itself. Remember that some of the most important elements of each presentation are the questions and suggestions from the audience and the speaker's responses to them. Suppose that you have 60 minutes for a presentation. You should probably prepare a talk that would run 40-45 minutes without interruption. 50 or 75 minute presentations can be structured proportionately. During the presentation itself, you should be ready to add or subtract slides as you get closer to the end. I usually have a few extra slides that I think might be useful in answering questions and that I can also include in the presentation if I end up having more time than I had expected. Remember, however, that there is nothing wrong in finishing a presentation a few minutes early, but it is a crime to run over time!

9. The toughest presentations to give are those scheduled for 20 or 30 minutes. You cannot just condense a 60 minute or 75 minute presentation into such a short period by flashing up slides rapidly. (Of course, you can do so if you really want to, but your audiences will not appreciate it.) If you have to cut a full length presentation down to a short one, change the philosophy of the presentation: In 20 or 30 minutes, the best you can do is try to get one idea across and to try to convince the audience that it would be worth their time to read your paper. What about 90 minute presentations? Many researchers are overjoyed at the prospect of expanding a 60 minute or 75 minute presentation to 90 minutes. It gives them a chance to ramble on and on. When invited to give such a long presentation, however, I tell the organizer that I will cut it short. It is not that I do not enjoy rambling on and on about my work — I do — it is just that I know how annoying it is to be in the audience while a presenter is doing this. If an audience wants to fill up the last 15 minutes of a 90 minute seminar period by enthusiastically asking questions and discussing the research, that is fantastic, but I try to stop the presentation itself by the 75 minute mark.

10. Since time is precious to you in your presentation, you should think carefully about how you want spend it. Long introductions are almost always a bad idea, unless, of course, you really have very little of substance to talk about. What the audience usually wants to learn during the introduction is what is the question that you intend to answer, why the question and the answer are important, and, probably, what your answer is going to be. In general, audiences do not like research presentations to be mysterious. Surprise endings are fine for novels and films, but usually not for economic research.

11. Remember in preparing your introduction that the audience is probably not very interested in your own personal history of economic thought. If your research is closely related to other papers, it is worth briefly explaining the relationship. Long discussions of the literature and, in particular, slides with long lists of papers, are usually a waste of precious time during a presentation.

12. It is worth stressing that you need to try to pose a clear and interesting question in the introduction and then to answer it during the rest of the presentation. This is far more difficult than it may sound. Put another way: To make a good presentation, you need to present a good paper.

13. Even economic researchers who have not done well in presentations in the past and who think of themselves as bad public speakers can do a very good job presenting their work. The trick is to prepare and to practice! It is never a mistake to think of the audience as doing you a favor by coming to listen to your ideas and to discuss them.

You will learn a lot in preparing for your presentation. You can also learn a lot from the presentations of others. When invited to a conference or workshop, or when attending a seminar at your own institution, try to take at least a quick look at the paper or papers ahead of time. A useful list of questions that I ask of myself when I am going through a paper before a presentation is: What question is this paper trying to answer? What sorts of tools does the author use to answer the question? What is the answer that the author comes up with and does it make sense to me?

After attending a good presentation, try to think of what the presenter did to make it so good. Just as importantly, after attending a bad presentation, try to think of what the presenter did to make it so bad. You can get as many ideas for improving your own presentations in bad presentations as in good ones.

Using Computer Projectors

If you are planning to use a computer projector for your presentation, you need to decide what format to use. A very common format is Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF). In my experience, MS PowerPoint is more useful for business presentations and in teaching undergraduates and MBA students. I am sure that a good presenter could come up with a good presentation of economic research that makes use of all of the colors and things popping up and flying around in PowerPoint, but I have not seen one yet. Below are some tips on giving a presentation in PDF.

1. PDF slides are portable by their very construction; most computers you will encounter will have a version of Adobe Reader. Not all computers will have the same font sets, though, so it is very important, when creating PDFs, to embed all the fonts. If you do not embed the fonts used in your slides, and the machine you are using for your presentation does not have those fonts, Reader will try to make font substitutions. These font substitution can have unexpected effects: ¥ can be substituted for e, for example. This is not only embarrassing, but it can make your presentation impossible to follow. PDFs can be created from almost any program: Microsoft Word, Scientific Workplace, and Latex distributions, to name a few. If you are using Adobe Acrobat/Distiller to make your PDFs you can embed

all fonts by changing your settings. For example, in a Microsoft Office application with Acrobat installed, you can choose Change Conversion Settings... from the Adobe PDF menu to get to the settings dialog. Choose Advanced Settings..., click on the Fonts tab and make sure the checkbox next to Embed all fonts is checked. If you are using Scientific Workplace or Latex, you will have to open Acrobat Distiller, choose Settings, select Edit Adobe PDF Settings..., click on the Fonts tab, and again make sure the checkbox next to Embed all fonts is checked.

2. Once you have created your PDF version of your slides, check it to be sure that your fonts will display correctly. To do this, open your slides in Adobe Reader and pull down the Advanced menu (or the Documents menu on older versions of Adobe Reader). Make sure that Use Local Fonts is unchecked. Next look at your slides in full screen view by pressing Ctrl+L. Look through each slide and be sure that all of the fonts, equations and graphs are correctly displayed. (After you are done, you can go back and check Use Local Fonts.)

3. A common complaint from researchers beginning to use digital slides is that it is difficult to progress nonlinearly through the slides. Suppose I am on slide 2, and someone asks a question for which I have prepared a backup slide. If I were using transparencies, I would go to my stack of backup slides, pick out the one I needed, and display it. If I were using a PDF version of my slides, my backups would be the last few pages of my slides. I could quickly flip through all my slides to get to the end, show the slide I wanted and flip back, but that annoys some people. An alternative is to use links in your PDFs. Links in PDFs are similar to links on a webpage. You may link to other slides in your presentation, to pages on the world wide web, or to external files. Kim Ruhl has written up some tips on how to link in PDF slides. They are posted at <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/~kjr296/files/LinkinginPDF.pdf>.

4. The only good way to make computer slides is to use landscape layout. If, for some reason, you have to show a slide in portrait layout, you can zoom in on parts of the slide using Ctrl++. (After showing this slide, you will need to use Ctrl+- to go back to flipping through landscape slides.)