How to create
a good
conference presentation

What is a conference presentation and what is its main idea?

A conference presentation is a factual, concrete way of presenting research results along with conclusions resulting from in-depth knowledge and analysis based on a researcher's findings or ideas. These types of presentations are a kind of introduction to the particular subject, or conclusion, and may prove to be an excellent starting point for new experiments and researches. The purpose of conference presentations are not only disseminate knowledge on a certain topic "behind the scenes", but above all – to engage and interest the listeners and hopefully motivate additional research/collaborations to obtain innovative results. It is worth exploring the subject of how to create a presentation and how materials and methods, not only its contents, draw listeners' attention to the presentation. The presentation should inspire both you and your listeners to tell an impressive scientific story.

Before you start

There is a considerable difference between types of presentations. Although it is a crucial way of presenting 'science', it is usually limited to show only a tiny handful of all the topics you might like to discuss. Talks can vary tremendously in length, from short 15-20 min minisymposia presentations to longer keynote lectures. Organizing a presentation for a specific length of time can significantly impact the logic and flow of the talk. If you prepare a short presentation where yours is one amongst many, probably one slide will be sufficient as an introduction, and a second as methods; results should be close to 3-4 slides, highlights showing key points; and then a brief summary or conclusions slide.

Where to start?

Ask yourself first who your listener(s) will be. Will it be another scientist, the head of a well-known international company, students, or a potential co-worker? Or maybe it will be a person who has no idea about what you are talking about. You should consider this beforehand so that everyone joining the conference can understand what your subject of research and the results are. For example, for broad presentations to non-specialists, if you are a mathematician, physicist, or chemist – explain all the terms used each time, so that humanists clearly understand what you mean and why it is so important. The same is applicable if you are a specialist in humanities talking to mathematician, physicist, or chemist. Set a particular aim. If you would like the discussion to bring new reflections, try to be convincing to everyone and gain a new perspective of representatives representing various scientific areas. Moreover, make sure you indicate the keywords the first time they are used, often in the initial few slides. This will help both you and your audience; you – to logically arrange the lecture and the others – to find out what is the most important point of the whole speech.

The most important features

Let's think about how many presentations you have made throughout your whole scientific activity. Remember them. Perhaps they contained a lot of text, or focused on everything you considered "the most important" and made the key points barely in the background? Of course, you may know very well how to create a good presentation and there is no need to give you any additional tips. However, you will surely agree that even if you only sort out all the rules you have already known from different sources, it is still useful.

Background / outline

The way of presenting and explaining information is the most important aspect of your talk. Make sure that everything is understandable even to an average participant who does not know specialist terminology, and the mode of presenting is as clear as possible and organized in a cause-and-effect sequence. By the time you will have made your presentation – and even before you sit down to prepare it – make sure you know what you are going to present. Lecturers must be clear-minded about the topic they present. Keep your presentation yours! The style should be as personal as possible and genuine so that your listeners will trust you and… the power of your research!

Sections

Do you know that feeling when you are not quite sure how to organize the information? Each of them is significant and you do not want to give up any. Let's divide your presentation into sections. There can be even six of them! Then your message will be clear and consistent. Keep in mind that the whole presentation should be seamless, and slides need to flow logically from one to the other. This way, all parts and motifs will be intertwining smoothly.

'Less is more'

Every scientist knows that the material selection can be the most burdensome of all the scientific work. It is no wonder that during lectures or presentations, lecturers try to present and provide listeners with as much information as possible, in order to provide as much detail as possible. Nothing could be more wrong: the less information you have, the more room for creativity! And therefore – your "story" related to the research subject you handle. So say as much as possible instead of "squeezing in" information on countless slides. Your listeners would like to know your point of view on a given issue, not the material transferred to… the keyboard. For specialists interested in the details, this can be easily addressed by referencing published methodology that closely follows your own study. Reducing word counts for a simpler message can also be done using images, for example a flowchart or table to describe methods.

A little bit of… maths

With a measure of desire and perseverance, we are going to create a really interesting "framework" of the presentation, e.g., using PowerPoint. However, it is not only just a case of graphic designers; it is mainly about an interesting presentation of your research results.

It is essential to make them more than just sentences stretching over several lines that are meant to describe the width of stages and observations. Graphs, drawings, and diagrams are the most "catchy" way to present science graphically. Let's use them!

Concept

What is the concept? In the past, it was used to express a joke; nowadays – it means an idea, as well as 'a conception coming to mind rapidly'. While sitting at the computer and creating a great conference presentation, take a piece of paper and draw what you would like to present. Having re-draft a plan – we could say: an action – you will be able to move on to work with a precise idea, avoiding sitting in front of the screen for hours intending to write at least a sentence. It is crucial to make your presentation inspiring and… not as obvious as it could seem to be. Concept is not only an idea, it is a way of presenting. So keep your audience guessed and interested all the time.

"Design"

An English word design means nothing more planning the graphics of the presentation. Once you know exactly what you would like to show, you can put your idea into practice. Although it may seem like a "task" for graphic designers who are familiar with the secrets of publishing programs, graphic designing falls within an area of responsibility of each person. The so-called presentation layout is a composition of slides within the presentation, as well as the content of each slide itself. Do not be afraid of "negative space". It is said that approx. 40% of your presentation should be left blank to ensure the whole presentation being clear and readable. What also important is to put catchy slogans or a game of colors – it is essential to attract the listeners' attention. Do you recall a "method" of adding photos of animals into Facebook posts? Here is its secret: making the photo "grab" the readers' attention and lead them straight to your posts. When creating presentations, it is worth avoiding using a lot of various fonts and different colors. As for the fonts – two are enough to represent a given part (e.g. one – headers, the other – the main text). When it comes to colors – let's choose a combination of shades that will not "distract" our eyes by the entire scale.

Before you finish

Of course, before you consider the presentation done and are happy to move forward, e.g. send it to conference organizers, you should think about it again, become a part of the audience for a moment, and re-check the content. It is important to avoid random typos or unintentional mistakes in the results. When you are sure the work is completed, you can join the conference and make the world even a little better thanks to your presentation!