

Computer Science Guidelines for Undergraduates

Giving Oral Presentations

This is a set of guidelines for giving academic presentations. It does not replace the need for guidance and input from your instructor. When there is a conflict, follow the directions of your instructor.

1. Appearance

When you attend an important event, you dress appropriately. Your presentation is an important event (or at least you want your audience to trust you are serious). Therefore you should show up looking like you feel it is important. This does not necessitate ties and jackets, or smart dresses. It does mean that you should be clean and neat and looking like you put some thought into the event.

Dressing well can also boost confidence. Most people feel confident when they feel they look good. Confidence will help your talk go over well.

Those that are nervous sometimes state that it increases their nerves if they admit that this is an important event. So they dress down to convince themselves that it is not really a big deal. Too bad that this a) doesn't remove their nerves and b) convinces the audience that it isn't a big deal!

2. Presentation

It is important to speak with confidence. You should have a good speaking pace, a good speaking volume and sound like you know what you are talking about (even if you don't 😊). Achieving this when you are either nervous or worried about your command of English is a challenge. The trick is to practice giving your talk out loud. Preferably you want to do this in an environment similar to the one in which you will give the talk.

Find a friend to sit at the back of the room. Your friend can tell you if you are too fast or too slow, or too loud or too quiet. Get used to looking at your friend while you speak (NOT at the slides, NOT at your notes, NOT at the floor). You can glance at your notes, but not read them.

Note that you must speak more slowly when talking to an audience, as opposed to talking to a friend. Think about this as you practice. This will also help the audience if you have a strong accent.

Volume can be increased by speaking from the "bottom of your stomach". Think about generating the sound way down in your belly – not in your throat/mouth. This will give you more volume without getting a sore throat. However, still have a bottle of water with you when you talk. This can do two things for you: 1) wet your mouth if it gets dry and 2) give you a chance to pause and reorganize mentally.

When the actual day comes you can speak once more to your friend (who will be seated at the back of the room as before.) If your friend is not there, then talk to the back wall. By looking and talking to the back, the audience feels more engaged. They assume you are making eye contact with someone behind them and thus get the feeling that you are talking to the audience. Of course, if you are really comfortable, you can look at various members of the audience – this is the best way.

By practicing your talk out loud (many times) you will find that you can recite the beginning of it (at least) very well. So, on the actual day, when nerves kick in and your mind freezes, you will find that you can start the talk by rote. After a few minutes your brain will realize that you have not died yet, and it will kick back in and help you out the rest of the way. This always seems to work 😊

Practice will also help you relax. This will let you avoid the “ums” and “ahs”. Get your friend to tell you if you do this a lot when you are talking. Most people do it when they are nervous. Some people also fiddle with something (a pen, a cup, a strand of hair). You want to avoid this – it is distracting to the audience. I once had a teacher where we spent most of our time counting how many times he straightened his tie. I am sure you have had similar experience.

3. Visual Aids

Visual aids are meant to enhance your talk. There is nothing more boring than watching someone read their slides. People who read slides tend to talk faster and more softly. They look at the slides instead of the audience. The audience is really watching the presenter read. There is no feeling that they are involved in the process. It puts them to sleep!

Also, most of us read faster than you can talk. I tend to read the slide, tune in the presenter, realize they are only half way through and then turn off until the next slide. This leads to the audience checking their phones for texts and e-mails. They are not involved in your talk. This would be very discouraging for you, except that you are so busy looking at the slides to read them that you don't notice that the audience is effectively out of the loop.

So, your notes belong on note cards that you can refer to periodically. Have lots of note cards with Very Big writing on them. This allows you to glance at them and see what comes next quickly. The visual aids (slides) should then **add** to the talk. For example, showing complicated equations, or pictures, or how concepts are associated. There is nothing wrong with having a slide remain showing while you move on. After all, the audience now has to listen to you and is more engaged with what you are saying. They don't have to have something to look at all the time 😊

Don't be afraid to use some humor on your slides. Don't force it, but if something humorous fits in, go for it. Audiences like to be entertained. Humor can go with presenting serious stuff.

4. Answering Questions

Rule number 1 in answering a question is: listen. Listen carefully to the question. Then, take a moment and make sure you understand what is being asked. Do not feel like you have to jump into an answer. If you are not sure that you understand the question – ask for clarification. Once you do understand the

question, take a moment and organize your thoughts. Then answer what was asked as clearly as you can. Do not add on six related items. If the questioner wants to know more, they will ask more. It is very frustrating to get a 10 minute answer when you wanted the 1 minute version.

Most presenters feel they must answer immediately or they will look bad. The truth is that if you take a moment to think, it gives the impression that the question was good enough to make you think. This is pat on the back for the questioner. It makes them feel better – that they have grasped some important point. Now when you answer it becomes something that they are more interested in hearing.

Do not be afraid to say a variant of “I don’t know.” You can say this in lots of different ways. For example, “We did not think of that, but I think it bears consideration.” Or “That was not within the scope of this work, but should be considered in the future.” Sometimes it is the questions that you don’t know the answers to that give you some good insight for the future.

Last words

When you attend a talk that someone else gives, pay attention to HOW they do it. What engaged you? What bored you? Did something distract you? Did something turn you off? What helped you to follow the talk? Learn from the experiences of others.