

Guidelines for Giving an LSA Paper

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BASICS

Your goal in presenting an LSA paper is that the audience should remember it favorably, associate your name with what you are reporting on, and ask some questions after the talk. Obviously, then, you need to present it clearly and concisely and stay within the time limits.

Organize the talk around one or two interesting and significant findings you want to present. Decide what you think your audience can be presumed to know and develop the talk to be suitable. When in doubt, do make your assumptions clear, but assume a very high level of intelligence on the part of the audience: they didn't come to hear things they already know. If they do get told some things they knew, at least don't patronize them (this is the LSA; your audience consists mostly of sophisticated professional linguists).

Don't do things that will annoy your audience. One of the worst is to say: "This is really an important point but I don't have time to go into it." If there is not going to be time for something important, you have not organized your presentation properly. And the worst of all is to begin with an apology. If your paper has faults but you plan to present it anyway, then just do so. Perhaps the audience will form a negative judgment later, and perhaps not; but just leave that to them.

Keep in mind that the style and timing of a paper intended for aural processing by a hearer is different than a paper intended for visual processing by a reader.

OUTLINE

A good talk will typically include sections on:

- the general problem area;
- the particular question addressed;
- the way you address it;
- the findings;
- the significance of the findings;
- the next steps to be taken.

HANDOUTS

Put your name and email address on the handout so that interested people can easily reach you.

Remember: the handout is an aid to the audience who is unfamiliar with your material, not a crutch for you. You should be able to present your talk without the handout.

The relevant part of the handout for 15-minute paper should typically be six pages or less. It may be useful to include an appendix to the main handout which can contain all the material you feel is relevant but do not have time to present.

The handout should track the logic of your talk and should contain the crucial points you will make (in the right order) and the critical examples that ground them.

It is fine to put more material on the handout than you can cover, but make the status of the material clear to the audience in advance. Just don't skip over it, though; say something like, "In (4)-(6) I've listed several counterexamples to that analysis that you can read and consider at your leisure."

If your examples are in another language with an English gloss, it is a waste of time to read all the examples in the other language to an audience of non-speakers. (But do read one or two to show off if your pronunciation is really spectacular!)

SLIDES

It is difficult to use both slides and a handout, so don't. If you use slides, make the font large and keep the content simple, probably no more than 8 lines per slide and no more than 8 to 10 slides for a 15-minute presentation (one slide to two minutes of presentation is a good rule).

When the audience is reading a slide, they are not listening to you. Rather than squeeze all the material onto a few slides, it is more effective to have many slides, each with a few lines of text, or a well-labeled simple graph or table.

After presenting a slide, wait to give the audience a chance to absorb it; then make your comments.

Use charts and graphs to summarize data, especially the results. Keep them simple, presenting only relevant data. Remember, the audience has never seen the slide and must process it while you are talking. You should never need to say "disregard such and such material on this chart/graph."

Check the status of the video/audio equipment prior to the talk. The second worst way to begin a paper is "How do I turn this thing on?" (or, for that matter, "Testing, one, two! Can you hear me at the back?").

You might want to have a friend change the slides for you so you can concentrate on the talk.

If you absolutely have to use both a handout and overheads, make sure they are coordinated.

PRESENTATION

Practice several times in front of a real, critical audience. Talk slowly. (You might have a confederate in the back of the room signal you if you should slow down.)

Speak clearly, keep your voice level up, and pause after you make important points. Many in the audience will be unfamiliar with your topic and will welcome the processing time. Those who are familiar with the material will welcome the time to think about the implications of what you are saying.

The allocation of time, whether for a 15-minute or a 30-minute paper, should be roughly like this:

Introduction and framing of the question: 25%

Presentation of data and findings: about 50%

Summary and significance: up to 25%

A good paper is not like a mystery story. Tell the audience at outset the main points and the structure of the talk. Then remind the audience as you go along, to provide benchmarks for your audience.

Don't read your talk word-for-word. It makes your talk uninteresting to listen to and it also greatly increases your chances of getting confused or lost in your own presentation. Practice your talk enough that you know what words to use without having to read them.

Don't read long quotations, and don't ask the audience to read them. It's boring and time-consuming. It is more effective to refer to the passage and to summarize it in your own words. If you must read a passage out, read it slowly; then wait a moment before going on. You can expect the audience to follow along with your reading, but you have to leave time for them to process the example and fit it into the developing mosaic.

If you get lost, admit it, pause, don't make excuses. Start again when you have found your place. Everyone has had the experience of losing their way, so you needn't be embarrassed.

Don't promise to "come back to it" unless you really intend to. And don't give more than one promissory note at a time. When you do come back, tell the audience.

Present a few examples in depth that illustrate your point — you can have extras on your handout, but just discuss one or two. The audience will trust you, and giving huge numbers of examples typically doesn't increase credibility, it only makes the head spin.

Don't go on over the time allotted, even if the chair ignores LSA rules and lets you do it. It's rude to the speakers that follow, rude to those in the audience who wish to leave to go to another room, and strongly indicative of an ill-planned talk.

There will usually be someone from the conference with a watch and cards reading '10 minutes left', '5 minutes left', '1 minute left', and 'Stop.' Don't forget to look over at this person regularly, both so that they do not have to wave the card at you and so that you actually get the information about how much time is left. You do not get extra time for failing to see the cards. Acknowledge the person holding the card with a nod of comprehension once you've seen it.

You may also want to write in marks on your own handout indicating where you expect to be when you see '10 minutes left' and so forth, so you can tell if you are ahead or behind.

Don't say you don't have time to address a point. Either address it or ignore it.

Give credit to others whose work you are depending on and/or those who assisted you.

At the end of the talk, tell the audience again what question you addressed, what you found, and its significance. Then say "thank you," so they know you're done.

QUESTIONS

Expect questions that surprise you. This is the LSA, people are smart. If you don't get difficult questions, you're delivering your papers at the wrong conferences.

Try getting friends and colleagues to ask you some of the expected questions in advance.

Keep your cool, don't get defensive. Most questions you're asked will be friendly. Really angry, hostile ones will be very rare and you can treat them quite differently. An excellent thing to say to a really rude questioner is, "I don't think I'll respond to that"; and you're fully within your rights to say that.

If you don't understand the question, say so, and ask for it to be repeated. If you don't know the answer, just say "I don't know." Don't bluff, don't bluster, don't abase yourself.

And if someone makes a good point but you're not prepared to answer it at that moment, ask them for an email address; deal with it later in correspondence.