HOW TO GIVE A TRULY BAD PRESENTATION IN SEMINAR

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Throughout your presentation, keep the class clueless about the motivation behind the study you’re presenting. You may understand the motivation, but don’t let anyone else in on the secret.¹

Don’t waste a moment: Launch right into the material without explaining any of the background to the study you’re presenting.

Never include background material that you can glean from sources other than the one paper you’re presenting. Stick strictly to whatever material you find in only that one paper. Don’t bother looking into what other scientists have done or said about the topic; don’t even look at what Wikipedia says about the general topic.

Never link anything that you’re presenting with material from a previous presentation or reading in NPsy 174. Your talk is an island unto itself (my apologies to John Donne’s Meditation XVII [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Meditation_XVII].

Surprise the audience! Everyone loves a surprise ending, so end abruptly right in the middle of a slide, or at least immediately after your last slide appears. And never end by summarizing the key points of what you’ve said. Do not try to wrap up; that would just help the audience remember what you’ve told them.

Don’t bother to organize your presentation. Who needs a clear beginning, a middle, and an end? No one. For example, this document itself has next-to-no organization.

Corollary to the previous item: For your presentation, just adopt whatever structure – good, bad, or indifferent – you find in the paper you’re presenting. If that organization was good enough for the authors to publish, it’ll be perfect for your own spoken presentation.

¹In the interests of spreading the blame, I gladly acknowledge two inspirations for this ultra-snarky document that I prepared for students in NPsy174 (Seminar in Visual Cognition). The first inspiration for this document was a webpage created by David Messerschmidt (University of California Berkeley) that offered wise hints on giving good and bad talks at computer science conferences [http://www.eecs.berkeley.edu/~messer/Bad_talk.html]. About 25% of the tips presented here were adapted from Messerschmidt’s suggestions. The second inspiration is an undeservedly obscure 2007 paper by Kaj Sand-Jensen (University of Copenhagen) that gives ten sure-fire tips for writing an excruciatingly-boring scientific paper. [http://www.philippeweil.com/links/BoringWriting.pdf]
Corollary to the previous item: Cognitive science tells us that there are no differences between reading something yourself and listening to it read to you. The cognitive tasks and their demands on the brain are identical.

Never give the audience an overview or preview of what you’ll be presenting. As I said, everyone loves a surprise.

Be sure to try to cover way more material than is possible in the time allotted. Don’t fret if you are running out of time; just jam your final ten or twenty slides into a single minute. Everyone in the class will shift into higher cognitive gear and keep up with you.

As you present, randomly mix crucial points with utterly-trivial ones. Let your classmates sort out which is which.

Go really really fast as you talk. That will allow you to bombard the class with every imaginable detail from the paper –however unimportant.

If you are uncomfortable with talking at warp speed, talk instead at glacial speed. Whichever speed you choose, though, sure to introduce random meaningless digressions and lots of pauses to throw the audience off the trail.

Bore your audience into restful naps by speaking in an unenthusiastic monotone –the resulting increased alpha-band oscillations in your audience’s cerebral cortices will do everyone good.

Don’t worry about whether the audience comes away with new knowledge or heightened interest in anything you have said; that is definitely their problem, not yours.

Drown your audience with far too much text on each slide. The wisdom on the internet is that more words will improve any slide. And a tsunami of words will teach the class to make choices, as between listening to you or reading your slides’ immortal prose.

When choosing a template for your talk, do not settle for anything plain or unadorned. Instead use the Powerpoint or Keynote template that offers the busiest, most distracting background image.

Don’t waste your time adding color to your slides in order to emphasize key points –let the class struggle to figure out what’s important. If the authors of the paper you’re presenting didn’t use color or other devices to enhance understanding, you shouldn’t either.

Use tiny fonts on your slides, preferably fonts that are near or below the limits of visual acuity. That will encourage everyone in the audience to rush out to a vision exam as soon
as you’re done.

When you include a table or figure from the paper you are presenting, put it on the slide exactly as it appeared in the paper. No matter how complex it may seem, the published version is absolutely perfect for your presentation. And don’t worry that it may be impossible for the class to read or understand that table or figure because it too complex or its details too small.

Never re-organize a published table or figure by presenting only a part of the table or figure on a slide. Worse, do not break any table figure into separate, more legible parts. Powerpoint and Keynote make such changes too hard to do.

Do not bother to create any tables, diagrams or summaries of your own for inclusion in your presentation (for the reason given in the preceding item).

Never use an animation or transition on a slide—even if that animation or transition would make it easier for the class to understand what you’re saying.

Look directly at your computer’s screen while you are presenting to the class: never, never make eye contact with members of your audience—it just encourages them.

If for some reason you are unable to stare exclusively at your computer during your class presentation, do the second best thing: look only at the projection screen in front of the room. Turn your back to the audience while you talk to the screen. And remember never ever make eye contact with any class member (for the reason given in the preceding item).

Don’t use a pointer, laser or otherwise, to help the audience know what part of a diagram they should be focusing on.

Don’t waste time practicing your presentation before you have to give it in class. You’ve got better things to do, e.g., Angry Birds.

Another time-saving tip: Once you’re done with a first version of your Powerpoint or Keynote presentation, do not waste time reviewing what you’ve done, looking for ways that the flow could be improved or for things that you might have omitted. That first draft is plenty good enough, and you’ve still got better things to do, e.g., more Angry Birds.

All the text on each of your slides should be written in complete sentence and paragraph form (eschew bullet points). Complete sentences and paragraphs make it easier for you to read your slides to the class word by word by word, exactly as the words appear on the slide. Again, the alpha oscillations will do everyone good.