Garetto's Random Thoughts on Presentations

These notes contain my completely unofficial personal opinions on how to make a good presentation. They are designed for EC791 students and PhD students in general.

The Introduction

There are many ways to write an Introduction in a presentation, but I always stick to the same "safe" format.

1. In the first slide after the title, state the main **topic** of the paper and what is the **question** that the paper attempts to answer.
2. In the second slide after the title, say what the paper actually does: whether is theoretical, empirical, quantitative, if it develops a new model/estimation technique, etc. etc. Here is where the **contribution** should be made loud and clear.
3. **Literature review**, to be skipped in short talks ($\leq$ 30 minutes), but always written in the slides:
   - Should be useful and well organized. For each paper you cite, think: it is necessary that I cite this paper?
   - Useful to group cited papers by topic.
   - You don't have to cite every paper you cite in the draft, but the important ones to make your audience see where you are going/how the paper fits with previous research. In this sense, see it as a "continuation" of the contribution slide.
4. **The Outline of the talk**
   - Some people write an *ad-hoc* slide with the outline. Personally I like to have a side panel that remains always on the slide: it is useful for people to remember where we are throughout the talk, and useful to navigate the talk without doing a lot of back and forth in the slides.
   - If you write an outline slide, NEVER put it as the first slide of your talk! It should be the last slide of the Introduction, before the body of the talk starts. Remember: first

you need to tell your audience WHAT you will be talking about, and then HOW you will structure your talk.

- Some people that write an outline slide like to recall it a the end of each section to say "here is where we are", to ease the transitions from a part of the paper to another. This is ok in long talks, but (in my view) a waste of time in short talks.

The Body of the Paper

Each paper is different, and needs to be presented in a way that brings up the contribution clearly throughout the talk. Slides don't need to be arranged like the paper! Try different formats and see which one is most successful with your audience. Here are some suggestions that may be useful.

- Develop a **leading example** to take you through the paper. Especially in theoretical papers or papers with very general models, it is easier for your audience to follow if they have something concrete in mind.
  - Example: if I present a paper about manufacturing FDI, I often talk about Ford or Toyota cars, firms/products that everybody knows.
- When presenting **data/empirical work**:
  - Present your **data sources** clearly and concisely. Same for **summary statistics**: present only the ones that are useful to make your point. It is useful to have links to more information in the Appendix in case people ask.
  - I think that the dataset you are using should be presented before the actual econometric technique. Presenting the econometrics before the data makes the exercise a bit abstract.
  - If possible, present features of your data with **Figures**. Figures can be very useful because:
    - They are usually more effective than Tables (people remember figures more than numbers!)
    - They are usually less time-intensive to present (particularly useful in short talks).

    When you put Figures in your presentation, make sure that they are as big as possible, that the legends and axis labels are legible, and that you have an informative title or caption that explains the figure in words.

- When presenting econometric results, try to make **Tables** that synthetically make the point. Don't take huge regression tables straight from the paper, but make smaller tables that contain only the baseline results (with links to the full tables and robustness tables in the Appendix). May use colors or highlight text to indicate to the audience which numbers they should be looking at.

- When presenting a **model**:

  - Spend more time on the **setup** than on the solution method. You want to convey a message, not show your math. This said, if there is a contribution in the solution method, you should mention it.
  - If you put an **equation** on the slides, you must go carefully through it, define the notation, and explain the intuition behind the equation.
  - For the reason above, when presenting, you need to choose which equations to present. You don't need to put on the slides all the equations that are in the paper. You should present only the equations that are useful to make your point.
  - Use colors and comments in underbraces to make your key equations clearer on the slide.
  - If some equations in the paper are standard for the specific literature you are in, just have a slide with text that mentions them, but don't write them in the slides. Have a link to a slide with the equations in the Appendix.
    - Example: if you a working on a variation of the Melitz model, most likely your free entry and labor market clearing are very similar to the ones of the standard Melitz model, so you don't need to write them up. Just say "Impose free entry and labor market clearing to close the model in general equilibrium".

- When presenting a **calibration** exercise:

  - Call it a "numerical example" (and not a calibration!) if your parameters are not chosen to match the data.
  - Don't spend time on how you calibrated the parameters in a short talk. In a long talk, a table summarizing the parameters' economic meaning and their sources/target data is very useful.
  - Also here, present the most important results/counterfactuals, and have links to all the robustness checks in the Appendix.

The Conclusions

The Conclusions slide is very important. It is your last word: what you say here is what people will remember when exiting the room. You need to think about it very carefully. Here some suggestions:

- Briefly restate the topic of the paper and the question it answers.
- Summarize the main takeaways and what we learn from the exercise.
- In an internal presentation of work-in-progress, useful to say what you plan to do next.
- In a job-market talk, you need to have a few bullet points (or better: a separate last slide) with where your research agenda is going, possible extensions and topic of related papers.

And then you are done! Here a few more suggestions that don't fit in the categories covered above.

General rules for writing good slides

- Don't put too much **text** in your slides. If you do, your audience will read your slides instead than listening to you. Limit the number of **bullet points**, and try to have each bullet point fit in one line. I usually write my slides and then go through multiple rounds of revision erasing unnecessary text.
- A **title** should be informative of the actual content of a slide. General titles are only taking away space.
- Do all your best to have each slide self-contained.
  - Example: It is hard to follow a model when the definition of equilibrium takes up three slides. If you are presenting –say– a model like Krugman (1979), have one slide for preferences and demand, one for technology and market structure, one for the definition of the equilibrium.
- Use white space! Don't have your text cramped or your figure small in the middle of the slide with a lot of white space around. Space your text across the slide and make your figure as large as possible.

Presentation length and Backup Slides

The length of a presentation should depend on the length of the talk and on the style of the seminar. Some venues allow all sort of questions from the audience, and in this case your talk should be on the shorter side. When no questions or only explanatory questions are allowed, you can allow yourself a bit more material.

- **The conference talk: 20-30 minutes**. These are usually talks with few interruptions, so you can use all or most of the time allowed. I find that for these talks a target of 20 slides is appropriate.
- **The job market talk: 90 minutes**. In a long seminar, and especially a job-market talk, all sort of questions may appear (and especially in the job market, where the audience is a general one, with people in many fields). My rule of thumb for these talks is not to exceed 32-33 slides and have a talk that I can deliver uninterrupted in one hour (so that with questions it gets to 90 minutes).

Presentation Style, Time Management, Answering Questions

There are few things that you can improve to give a more pleasant/clearer/understandable talk. Here are the ones that come to my mind, but this list is not exhaustive.

- **Answering questions** is an art you need to master. Always listen to the question until the end, without interrupting (so many people do, and it is so irritating!). If you need time to think, stop and think. Or have a sip of water while you think. Your answer should be short and concise, don't go off-board. It is nice (if feasible) to use a back-up slide if you have it ready on the topic, or to use the board and make a simple drawing/diagram if appropriate.
- Some audiences may be VERY vocal. You need to learn to handle your audience by giving short answers and postponing lengthier discussions. It's ok to say "we can discuss this later in more detail" but only after you tried to give a short answer.
- Don't go back and forth in the slides, unless your audience asks you to. It is very confusing!
- Make eye contact with your audience - a speaker that looks at the floor is terribly boring.

- **Prepare, prepare, prepare.** Better an over-prepared talk than an improvised one. Don't read notes.
- Always bring a notepad to mark the comments of the audience. You writing down a comment is a) useful for you - it might be something you need to do or you need to keep in mind to avoid the question next time; b) gives the impression that you are taking your audience seriously.
- Work on **time management**. Always have some slides you can skip if you are running late or some extra material to add if you have extra time. In a "real" seminar, it does not look good when you finish early because it looks like you run out of things to say. Set milestones: if after half the time you are nowhere near halfway through the talk, you need to start cutting material.
- When time runs out, don't try to cover material quickly, but choose what you want to present. In my opinion, when you run out of time you should go straight to the conclusion and take the time to conclude clearly to bring the main message home.

After the Talk

Your job is not over after you are done with your talk. Here is what you should do (in my opinion).

- **After an internal talk:** go talk to your advisor AND (more importantly) to all faculty members that attended your talk. You want to clarify/expand the amount of feedback you got.
- **After an invited seminar/job market talk:** get back to your audience about things you deferred during the talk (either in meetings if you have the chance, or by email). Take feedback seriously: people that make comments on your paper may be potential employers or future editors!
- **After any talk:** collect all comments received, prioritize and decide which comments need to be incorporated in the paper and which ones need to be discussed. Then, if you can, take a day off.